

Russia boosts momentum for Iran sanctions

AFP, United Nations/Beijing

World powers leading talks to rein in Iran's suspect nuclear ambitions upped the pressure on the Islamic republic on Wednesday, as momentum grew toward imposing new sanctions.

As Russian President Dmitry Medvedev appeared to make a major policy shift by countenancing tough new nuclear sanctions, the global powers said they still had "serious concerns" about Tehran's nuclear programme.

But China on Thursday reiterated its opposition to sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme, as Tehran came under mounting pressure from world leaders at the United Nations to stop uranium enrichment.

"We always believe that sanctions and pressure are not the way out," foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters.

Top diplomats from the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -- the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France -- plus Germany called

on Iran to meet its international obligations as they prepared for talks next week in Geneva.

"Iran's nuclear programme remains a matter of serious concern to the international community," British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said in reading a statement from the six powers.

"We acknowledge the recent measures taken by Iran regarding its cooperation with the IAEA and encourage Iran to cooperate further with the IAEA to resolve the remaining issues which need to be clarified to exclude the possibility of military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme."

He called on Iran to implement all the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council "to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme at the earliest possible date."

He said the group, known as the P5 + 1, expects "a serious response from Iran" on October 1.

Russia meanwhile moved

closer than ever before to Washington's position that the Islamic Republic should face crippling sanctions unless it makes concessions on its nuclear programme in the talks.

"Sanctions rarely lead to productive results, but in some cases sanctions are inevitable," Medvedev said, after talks with US President Barack Obama on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

The apparent US and Russian convergence came as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressed the annual debate.

Obama said after the talks at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York that time was running out for Iran to open the doors of its nuclear programme to the rest of the world.

"Serious additional sanctions remain a possibility," the president said, calling on Tehran to "seize the opportunity" at the talks with the P5 + 1.

While stiffening his position, Medvedev did call on the international community to

send the right signals and incentives to Iran to convince it to halt what Western powers and Israel claim is a cover to produce nuclear weapons.

"We need to help Iran to (make) the right decisions," he said.

US officials welcomed the remarks.

"We are in a different place in US-Russia relations, said Michael McFaul, the top official responsible for Russia on Obama's National Security Council, adding there was no "daylight" between the sides on the Iran issue.

"I cannot improve on what President Medvedev said. He could not have been clearer."

Taking a more conciliatory tone than his predecessor George W. Bush, Obama has asked Iran to accept an outstretched hand of friendship and engage with the United States on nuclear and other issues.

But on Wednesday, Obama urged world leaders to hold Iran -- as well as North Korea -- to account for their nuclear programmes, warning they threatened to take the world down a "dangerous slope."



The Canadian delegation walks out as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2nd-R) prepares to address the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly on Wednesday at the United Nations in New York.

Qaeda-linked inmates break out of Iraq jail

AP, Baghdad

Five al-Qaeda-linked prisoners awaiting execution and 11 other inmates broke out of a prison in Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, prompting a massive manhunt Thursday, officials said.

A complete curfew was imposed on the city of 250,000 after the prisoners escaped at around 11:15 p.m. Wednesday. Checkpoints have been set up throughout the city and at roads leading out, a Tikrit police officer said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss the operation with media.

At the request of local authorities, the US military in the area provided search dogs and aerial surveillance to help in the search, spokesman Maj. Derrick Cheng said.

The prisoners were being held on charges including terrorism, kidnapping and murder, and the majority have links to al-Qaeda in Iraq, the police officer said.

Some are still awaiting sentencing, but five were slated for execution on terrorism convictions, the officer said. One of the five was recaptured early Thursday in the Tikrit area, a 19-year-old from a town near the city.

Iraqi military spokesman Maj. Gen. Abdul-Karim Khalaf would not comment on the

inmates' possible links to al-Qaeda, saying only that six of the escaped convicts are considered "dangerous."

The police officer said authorities found a pipe wrench in a bathroom in the prison yard, which the inmates apparently used to open a ventilation window.

Khalaf would give no details on the prisoners or how they escaped, but said authorities were distributing wanted posters with photos of the fugitives in the city, which is about 130km north of Baghdad.

Extra surveillance has also been ordered at Iraq's borders and throughout the northwest of the country, Khalaf said.

Provincial authorities fired Col. Mohammed Saleh Jubara, the head of the anti-terrorism department for Salahuddin province, where Tikrit is located, the police officer said. The anti-terrorism department is responsible for the security of prisoners being held on terrorism related charges.

Provincial spokeswoman Fatin Abdul-Qadir said in a statement that a committee had been formed to investigate how the 16 prisoners escaped and whether they had any help getting the wrench into the prison. She did not comment on Jubara's firing, but state television said it was related to the prison break.

Ahmadinejad offers talks with experts on nukes

AFP, United Nations

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wants talks between Iranian and UN experts to allay fears about his country's nuclear program as international pressure mounts on Tehran.

In an interview with the Washington Post and Newsweek magazine Wednesday, Ahmadinejad also said Iran would offer to purchase enriched uranium for medical purposes from the United States at talks with

world powers on October 1.

"Why not just let them sit and talk and see what kind of capacity they can build? I think it is a good thing to happen," Ahmadinejad said of Iran's readiness to allow its nuclear experts to meet with international scientists.

A meeting of nuclear scientists, which Iran has not previously allowed, would be a historic first.

Ahmadinejad's overture came on the sidelines of a UN General Assembly session that saw stepped up pressure on

Iran to yield to international concerns that it is developing nuclear weapons.

Russia signaled it could back biting sanctions if Tehran fails to make concessions at the October 1 meeting with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

"Russia's position is simple: sanctions are seldom productive but they are sometimes inevitable. It is a matter of choice," Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said after talks with US President Barack Obama.

Kashmir should be buffer state, says Gaddafi

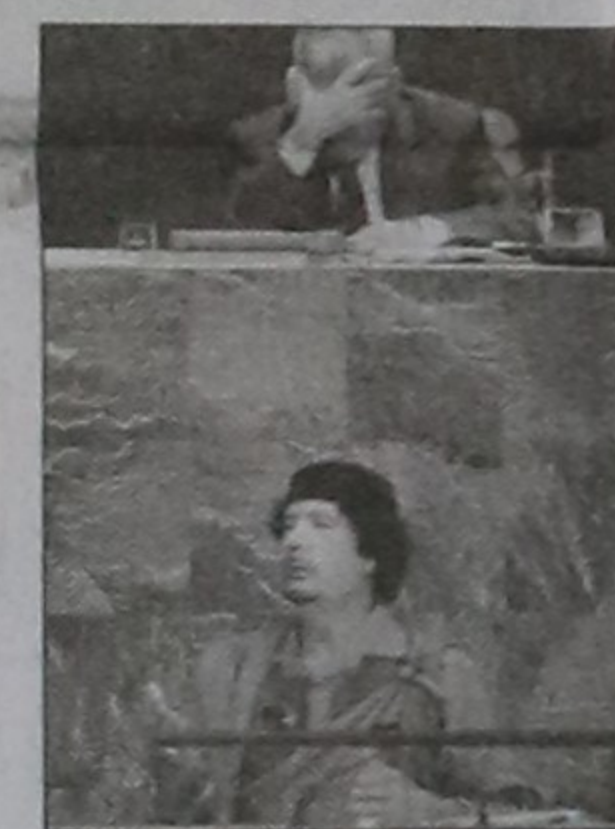
ANI, New York

In a 90-minute candid and at times vitriolic speech directed at delegates attending the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi demanded that Kashmir be declared an independent state between India and Pakistan.

During his first appearance before the UNGA, Gaddafi ranted about the United States and other Western powers. He also did not spare the UN Security Council, railing off the excesses of the developed nations.

Calling for the reform of the UN Security Council, he said: "It should not be called the Security Council. It should be called the 'Terror Council'."

The rambling and unscripted speech saw Gaddafi extend his speaking time for the officially scheduled 15 minutes to over an hour and a half.



Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi addresses the United Nations General Assembly on Wednesday at UN headquarters in New York.



UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon meets with Palestine Liberation Organisation leader Mahmoud Abbas during the 64th General Assembly at the United Nations in New York on Wednesday.

Obama's peace moves risk stoking ME strife

AP, Jerusalem

Rather than getting Israelis and Palestinians back to negotiations, President Barack Obama's high-stakes attempt to relaunch Middle East peace talks runs the risk of cementing Israeli intransigence and exacerbating Palestinian weakness.

A day after Obama hosted the Israeli and Palestinian leaders in New York, Israeli officials boasted that they had fended off US pressure to halt settlement construction. Moderate Palestinians said they felt undermined by Obama's failure to back up his demand for a freeze something Hamas militants were quick to exploit.

It has become clear in recent weeks that Obama has backed down on settlements after raising Palestinian hopes by saying in unusually blunt terms that all building must stop on lands the Palestinians claim for a future state.

That could seriously damage his credibility, especially in the Arab world. But it might also be a pragmatic realisation that a protracted dispute with Israel over a single issue threatened to distract attention from his wider goal of getting the sides together to start drafting a final peace deal.

Obama may have had Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' predicament in mind when he outlined a tight timetable for

upcoming diplomacy and chose particularly stern words to prod the sides to get serious. At one point in the three-way meeting on Tuesday, US Middle East envoy George Mitchell said Obama told the two leaders: "The only reason to hold public office is to get things done."

In a speech before the UN General Assembly on Wednesday, Obama renewed his call for an end to Israeli settlement activity, while also urging Palestinians to halt violence. But he also called for relaunching Middle East peace talks without preconditions, words that hardline Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed on Thursday.

Germany on terror alert after pre-vote warnings

AFP, Berlin

German security forces fanned out yesterday at busy transport centres ahead of the country's general election, after warnings of attacks in protest at the country's military deployment in Afghanistan.

Police with machine guns patrolled at airports and main train stations across the country, while armoured vehicles were visible on runways including at Frankfurt airport, one of Europe's busiest.

"There is no reason to panic," an interior ministry spokesman said. "There is an abstract threat as seen in the warning videos that we have received. We are taking it seriously and the security services are doing what they can."

The US State Department on Wednesday warned Americans to be on the alert while travelling to Germany, saying that al-Qaeda has recently released a video specifically warning the country of attacks.

Footage showed a man identified as Abu Talha "the German", warning in German that if Angela Merkel is re-elected as chancellor, "bitter times await the Germans".

Abu Talha, who German security forces believe to be a 32-year-old from Bonn named Bekkay Harrach, has made three other videos, but the latest one is "particularly disconcerting" since it mentions the for the first time a timeframe for an attack, terrorism expert Guido Steinberg told AFP.



A combination of handout images shows a Folded Cross, (Top L) a Gold and Garnet Scabbard Boss, (Top R) a Hilt Fitting (Bottom L) and a selection of items of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver (Bottom R) found in a field in central England. An unemployed British man has unearthed the biggest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver ever found, while out with his metal detector in a field, archaeologists said Thursday.

Hoard of Anglo-Saxon treasure found

AP, London

An amateur treasure hunter prowling English farmland with a metal detector stumbled upon the largest Anglo-Saxon treasure ever discovered, a massive collection of gold and silver crosses, sword decorations and other items, British archaeological experts said Thursday.

One said the treasure would revolutionise understanding of the Anglo-Saxons, a Germanic people who ruled England from the fifth century until the Norman conquest in 1066. Another said the find would rank among Britain's best-known historic treasures.

"This is just a fantastic find completely out of the

blue," Roger Bland, who managed the cache's excavation, told The Associated Press. It will make us rethink the Dark Ages. That's basically what it's going to do."

The seventh century hoard, found by 55-year-old Terry Herbert on farmland in western England two months ago, consists of about 1,500 pieces of gold and silver, some inlaid with precious stones. So fine is the craftsmanship that experts say it could have belonged to Anglo-Saxon royalty.

Herbert, from the town of Burntwood, found the gold on July 5 and spent the next five days scouring a stretch of farmland for the rest of the hoard.

Brown denies 'Obama snub' at UN

AFP, London

US President Barack Obama turned down five requests from British Prime Minister Gordon Brown for a meeting this week, amid tensions over the release of the Lockerbie bomber, reports here said Thursday.

Brown's office denied the premier had been snubbed by Obama, amid reports that requests for bilateral talks at the United Nations and the G20 summit in Pittsburgh had been denied.

Instead of a formal meeting, Brown and Obama held a 15-minute "walk and chat" in a kitchen at the UN headquarters in New York as both men left the building on Tuesday night, the Daily Telegraph said, citing unnamed sources.

Vote enables governor to fill Kennedy's crucial Senate seat

AFP, Boston

Massachusetts lawmakers voted Wednesday to allow an interim replacement of late senator Edward Kennedy -- a measure that would hand President Barack Obama a vital extra vote in his health care battle.

The Massachusetts bill allows Governor Deval Patrick to appoint an interim replacement to Kennedy, rather than leave the seat empty until a special election in January.

That could make or break Obama's battle to push health reform through a sceptical Congress.

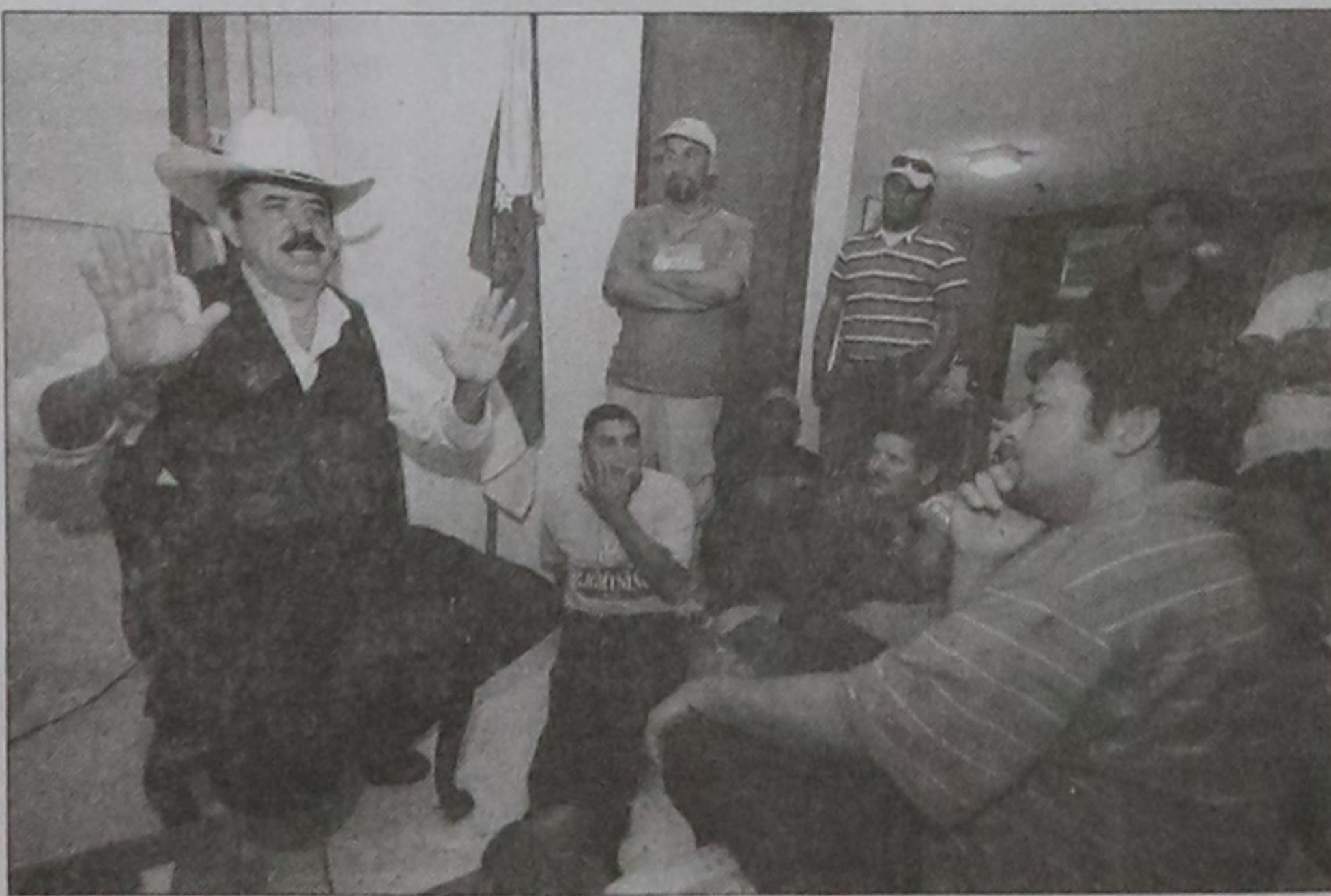
Honduras lifts embassy siege curfew

AFP, Tegucigalpa

Honduras' interim government on Thursday lifted a nationwide curfew but maintained a siege of the embassy where deposed president Manuel Zelaya has taken refuge amid new diplomatic efforts to end the crisis.

The curfew was imposed after Zelaya's secret return to the country on Monday heightened tensions across the Central American nation. He is now in the Brazilian embassy with supporters.

Police said two people have been killed in protests since Monday. Security forces fired tear gas at protesters outside the embassy on Wednesday night.



Ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya (L) answers questions from the press at the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa on yesterday.

Qaeda threat sparked closure of US embassy in South Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

An al-Qaeda splinter group threatened to attack the US embassy in Pretoria, prompting the United States to close its diplomatic posts in South Africa, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The group phoned the embassy on Monday and threatened to attack US government buildings in South Africa, including the embassy and aid offices, The Star newspaper said, citing "well-placed security sources".

The report did not identify the group, but said the threat was apparently prompted by the killing of a top regional al-Qaeda leader in Somalia during a lightning US military operation last week.