

No change on Jerusalem policy: Netanyahu

US standing firm in row with Israel

AFP, Jerusalem/Washington

Israel vowed its policy on Jerusalem would not change as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday convened his security cabinet to craft a response to US demands for peace-promoting concessions.

Netanyahu returned from Washington on Thursday after a tense visit that appeared to deepen a bitter row with the administration of President Barack Obama over the building of Jewish settlements in annexed Arab east Jerusalem.

"The prime minister's position is that there is no change in Israel's policy on Jerusalem that has been pursued by all governments of Israel for the last 42 years," his office said in a statement.

Early Thursday Defence Secretary Robert Gates was even at pains to renew administration warnings that Israeli-Palestinian tensions harm US security interests in the Middle East.

"The lack of progress toward Middle East peace is clearly an issue that's exploited by our adversaries in the region," Gates said adding it "does affect US national security interests in the region."

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The US appears in no mood to blink first in its tense showdown with Israel after reportedly handing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a blueprint to kick start moribund peace talks, experts said Thursday.

"The United States thinks it can't compromise with its national interests," political analyst Amjad Atallah from the New America foundation told AFP. "I'm not sure the Israelis have adjusted yet to this."

The Americans have reportedly demanded from Netanyahu a series of steps to help kick-start stalled peace talks with the Palestinians.

The hawkish premier was to discuss the US demands with his inner forum of seven senior ministers later in the day.

Cabinet Secretary Zvi Hauser said it was unlikely there would be quick agreement among the seven and denied media reports of a US deadline to supply answers by Saturday night.

"I suggest you wait patiently. The forum of seven is meeting today in the afternoon to discuss things. If there is a necessity for further discussions they will happen," Hauser told public radio.

China joins conference call on Iran

Iran nuke plant launch unrelated to sanctions: Russia

AFP, United Nations/Moscow

After weeks of stalling, China joined five other major powers in a conference call to weigh proposed new UN sanctions against Iran over its suspect nuclear program, diplomats said.

Iran's launch of a Russian-built nuclear power plant will go ahead and is in no way linked to possible new sanctions over its alleged weapons programme, Russia's foreign ministry said Thursday.

"It would be wrong to make any links between the construction and the launch of the plant and the growing need to take new measures towards Tehran," ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko said, quoted by Russian news agencies.

In Moscow last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that going forward with the inauguration of the nuclear plant that Russia has helped build at Bushehr would send Tehran the wrong message.

But Nesterenko denied that the United States had voiced any concern over Bushehr in bilateral talks.

A senior Chinese official on Wednesday took part in the call with fellow foreign ministry political directors from Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States.

Britain's UN Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant

identified the Chinese official assigned to the exchanges from capitals as Liu Zhenmin, who until recently was China's deputy UN ambassador here.

He told reporters here that the six officials "have agreed they will have further discussions of possible measures (sanctions) early next week."

Asked whether China's presence signalled a willingness by Beijing to engage substantively in bargaining over a fourth round of sanctions against the Islamic Republic, the British envoy said: "my understanding is that they (the Chinese) have agreed to engage substantively."

Meanwhile, the White House said US President Barack Obama also held a video conference Wednesday with the leaders of Britain, Germany and France to discuss next steps on Iran.

The Security Council already has slapped three rounds of sanctions on the Islamic Republic over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment, which the West and Israel view as a cover to build nuclear weapons.

Earlier Wednesday, China's new UN Ambassador Li Baodong would only say that his country, which maintains close energy and economic ties with Tehran, has always advocated diplomacy and was "working with other members to find a peaceful solution."

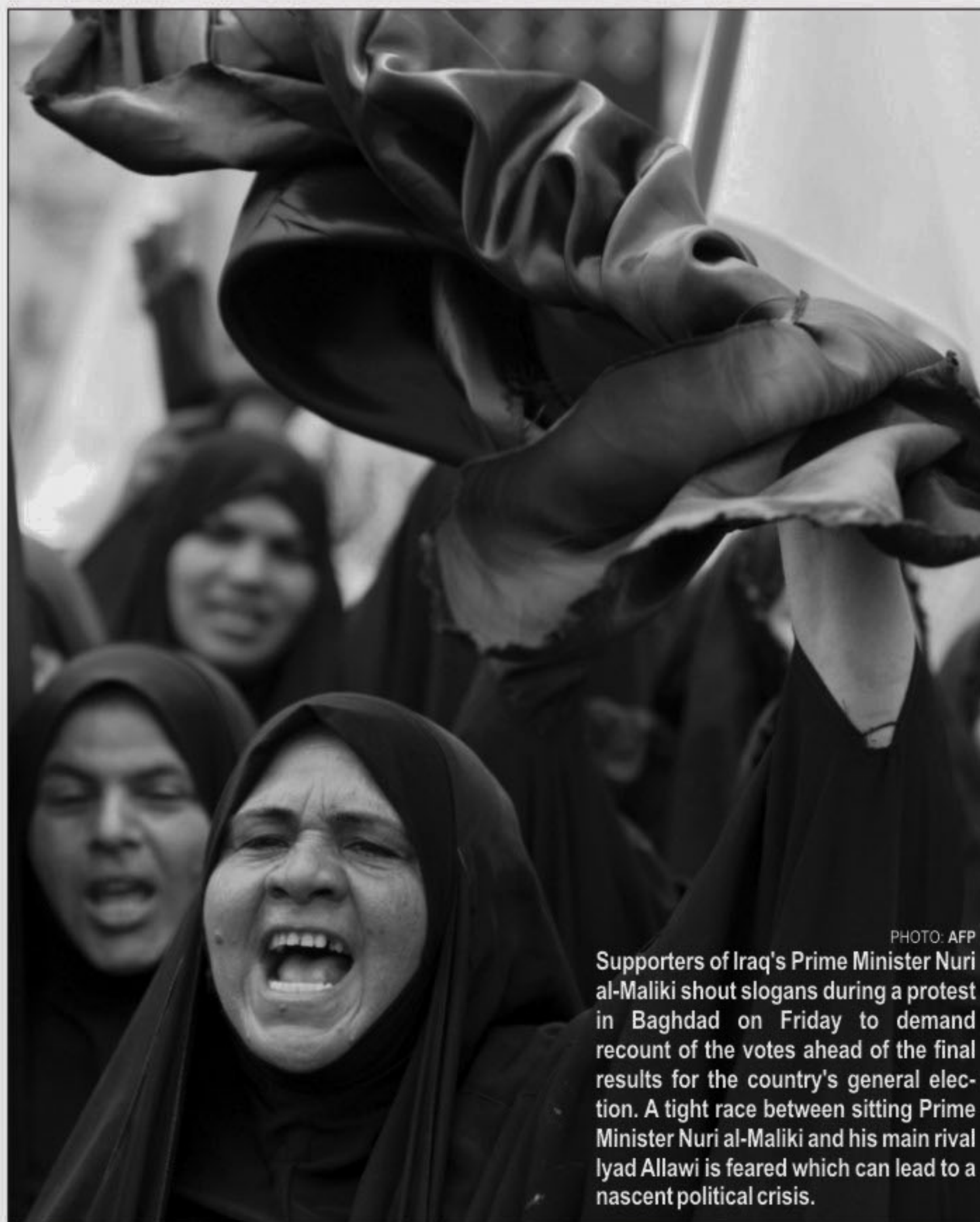


PHOTO: AFP
Supporters of Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki shout slogans during a protest in Baghdad on Friday to demand recount of the votes ahead of the final results for the country's general election. A tight race between sitting Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his main rival Iyad Allawi is feared which can lead to a nascent political crisis.

Iraq awaits vote results amid tight race

AFP, Baghdad

Full results from Iraq's elections are due on Friday amid a tight race between sitting Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his main rival Iyad Allawi and fears of a nascent political crisis.

Nearly three weeks after the March 7 parliamentary polls, the national election commission is set to release the full results, with the prolonged counting process fuelling allegations of fraud and vote manipulation.

The results come around five months before the withdrawal of all US combat troops, and Washington will be keen to see a smooth outcome.

Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is set to publish the figures at a news conference at the Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone at 7pm (1600 GMT).

Figures released by IHEC, based on 95 percent of ballots cast, put just 11,000 votes

between Maliki's State of Law Alliance and Allawi's Iraqiya bloc. Profile: Iyad Allawi

The two groups are on pace to garner 91 seats apiece in the 325-member Council of Representatives, according to an AFP calculation.

The list that forms the single largest group in parliament will be asked by Iraq's president, who is elected by the legislature, to form a government.

If it does not succeed within 30 days, another group will be selected, as per Iraq's constitution.

However, no bloc is expected to win the 163 seats required to form a parliamentary majority, and protracted coalition building is likely.

The Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition led by Shia religious groups, and Kurdistan, comprised of the autonomous Kurdish region's two long-dominant parties, are expected take 68 and 42 seats respectively and will be major players in any talks on forming a government.



PHOTO: AFP

Two young Lao Hmong hill tribe girls look at foreign reporters and diplomats arriving to visit the village of Phongkham in Bolikhamxay province on Friday where some 3,000 Lao Hmong were resettled after recently being deported from Thailand. In December Bangkok sparked outrage when it defied global criticism and used troops to repatriate about 4,500 ethnic Hmong.

Thaksin appeals against asset seizure

AFP, Bangkok

Lawyers for former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday filed an appeal against a 1.4 billion dollar asset seizure, saying they had new evidence to reopen the high-profile case.

Thaksin's chief counsel said they lodged a 500-page appeal with the Supreme Court on behalf of family members including Thaksin's ex-wife, Pojaman, and his two children, Panthongtae and Pintongta.

"Today we have submitted new evidence and new witnesses which the court has not yet deliberated on," Chatthip told reporters, adding that they also sought a halt to the execution of February's asset seizure ruling.

He said the Supreme Court would establish a five-judge panel to decide whether to accept the appeal.

The court had found Thaksin guilty of conflict of interest while he was prime minister between 2001 and 2006, and confiscated 1.4 billion dollars of a 2.2 billion dollar fortune in frozen assets.

The ruling triggered demonstrations by Thaksin's red-shirted supporters from March 14, with plans for a fresh mass rally on Saturday which organisers said would exceed last week's street parade that drew 65,000.

US, Russia agree to a sharp N-arms cut

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed yesterday to a sharp cut in the nuclear arsenals of both nations in the most comprehensive arms control treaty in two decades. "We have turned words into action," Obama declared.

Obama said the pact, to be signed April 8 in Prague, was part of his effort to "reset" relations with Russia and a step on a path toward "the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."

The agreement would require both sides to reduce their arsenals of long-range nuclear weapons by about a third, from 2,200 now to 1,500 each. The pact, replacing and expanding a 1991 treaty that expired in December, was a gesture toward improved U.S.-Russian relations that have been badly frayed.

"In many ways, nuclear weapons represent both the darkest days of the Cold War, and the most troubling threats of our time. Today, we have taken another step forward in leaving behind the legacy of the 20th century while building a more secure future for our children," Obama said at the White House.

In Russia, Medvedev's spokeswoman Natalya Timakova told the Interfax news agency. "This treaty reflects the balance of interests of both nations."

Both sides would have seven years after the treaty's ratification to carry out the approximately 30 percent reduction in long-range nuclear weapons. The agreement also calls for smaller cuts to warheads and bombs based on planes, ships and land.

"We have turned words into action. We have made progress that is clear and concrete. And we have demonstrated the importance of American leadership and American partnership on behalf of our own security, and the world's," Obama said.

Though the agreement must still be ratified by the Senate and the Russian Duma before it takes effect, Obama and Medvedev plan to sign it next month in Prague, the city where last April, Obama delivered his signature speech on arms control.

Speaking in the White House briefing room, Obama said the treaty by the globe's two largest nuclear powers would "send a clear signal that we intend to lead" the rest of the world in reducing the nuclear threat.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton noted that the U.S. and Russia still possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons. "We do not need such large arsenals to protect our nation," she said.

Southern 'cousin' of T rex found

BBC ONLINE

Scientists have found the first evidence that tyrannosaur dinosaurs - relatives of the famous T rex - existed in the southern hemisphere.

Previously, tyrannosaurs had only been known from fossil finds in northern continents, the team of researchers write in *Science* journal.

Now, a hip bone found in Australia has been identified as belonging to a southern relative of T rex.

It came from an animal about 3m (9ft) long and weighing around 80kg (176lb).

This is much smaller than T rex, which measured about 12m long and weighed around four tonnes. Giant size like this is thought to have evolved late in the tyrannosaur lineage.

The specimen, known only as NMV P186069, was unearthed at Dinosaur Cove, in Victoria, Australia. The fossil, which is around 110 million years old, lays to rest any doubt that tyrannosaurs inhabited the southern continents.

Obama's Twitter account hacker released

ANI, London

The hacker who broke into US President Barack Obama's Twitter account has been released by the French police.

The unemployed 25-year-old was taken into custody after being chased by both French officials and FBI agents, according to a foreign news agency.

The suspect, who used the pseudonym "Hacker Croll", was said to have had no specialist training and gained access into the popular micro-blogging website by simply guessing users' passwords, reports *The BBC*.

His targets also include other US celebrities, including Britney Spears, according to officials.

Japan finalizing Okinawa proposal

AP, Tokyo

Japan is still seeking to move a contentious American military base off the southern island of Okinawa and will finalize its proposal for Washington by end March, the prime minister said yesterday.

Officials have considered various options but will boil them down to one proposal to resolve the dispute by May as promised, Yukio Hatoyama told a news conference.

The sprawling US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma airfield has become a contentious issue between the allies.

Okinawans have long protested the heavy US military presence on the island, which hosts more than half the 47,000 US troops in Japan under a security pact.

To lighten Okinawa's load, Tokyo and Washington in 2006 agreed to move the Futenma air field to a less crowded part of the island, and move 8,000 Marines from the island to the Pacific island of Guam.

But Hatoyama's coalition government, which came to power last September, has been reviewing the relocation site agreed by the previous conservative government, and is divided over calls for the base to move off the island altogether.

"We will have to limit our proposal to one, or our negotiations won't work," Hatoyama said yesterday.

"Considering the burden on Okinawa, I would like to seek ways as much as possible to relocate (the base) outside" the island, Hatoyama said. "I'll do everything I can."

He refused to disclose details on alternative locations that were under consideration.

Earlier Friday, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada met with US Ambassador John Roos to give him an update on Japan's progress on Futenma, while Defence Minister Toshimi Kitazawa flew to Okinawa to meet with local officials.

Okada did not give details of his talks with Roos.

HEALTH CARE US lawmakers at war over threats

AFP, Washington

The divided US Congress united Thursday to denounce threats and violence aimed at lawmakers who voted for President Barack Obama's health care overhaul, but feuded bitterly over who was to blame.

Obama's Democratic allies linked the abuse to yearlong, superheated Republican charges including claims that the law would cripple American freedoms or even usher in Armageddon, the fieriest end of the world.

"The debate here has been a very angry debate, very frankly. Implications of socialism, communism taking over the government, none of which is true," Democratic

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer told CNN.

"We need to be very careful, because while that may be perceived in the halls of Congress as simply hyperbole and debate which is hot, but certainly does not encourage violence or violent actions, nevertheless, can be perceived by some as doing that," he said.

Hoyer said Wednesday that police and the FBI had been called in after more than 10 Democrats reported threats or vandalism -- including a faxed message with a noose, a brick thrown through a window, and obscenity-laced voicemail messages expressing the hope that a lawmaker would get cancer and die.

New US sanctions target Iraqi Qaeda

AFP, Washington

The US Treasury Department has announced new financial sanctions targeting Muthanna Harith al-Dari, an Iraqi accused of providing support to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

The Treasury said it had also partnered with Iraq's government to add Dari to the United Nations 1267 Committee list of al-Qaeda and Taliban-linked individuals and entities.

The sanctions freeze any US assets belonging to Dari, and prohibit US citizens from doing business with him.

In a statement, the Treasury Department accused Dari of trying from August 2008 to "reinvigorate the insurgency in Iraq by providing training to any insurgent organization" targeting foreign troops.

It said Dari provided one million dollars to AQI member who recruited and trained fighters, and funded a group, which used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in attacks on Coalition Forces.

The Treasury said Dari also funded another AQI cell, plus his own group the 1920s Revolutionary Brigade.

Dari is a former spokesman of the Sunni Muslim Scholars' Association, an organization formed shortly after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that sought to defend the rights of Sunni Muslims.

His father was chief of the organization, which began to lose influence around 2007.

Iran urges West to punish Israel over settlements

AFP, Tehran

Iran also urged the West to take action against Israel over the Jewish state's decision to build more settlements in east Jerusalem.

"The action taken by Western countries should no longer be theatrical but should be practical (and) put a stop to the Zionist regime's state terrorism," ISNA news agency quoted Ramin Mehmanparast as saying.

Iran on Thursday dismissed as "worthless" Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's warning that the Jewish state has the right to self-defence.

Netanyahu's comments "stem out of Satanic thoughts and are worthless," ISNA news agency quoted Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast as saying.

The Israeli leader's comments made during a visit to Washington were "low life thoughts," said Mehmanparast.

Mehmanparast also slammed Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for saying that demands for a settlement freeze were "unreasonable," and that "Jerusalem is not a settlement. It is our capital."

The Iranian spokesman said such a policy portrayed the "Zionist regime leaders' habit of aggression and occupation."

He called on the Organisation of Islamic Conference and Arab League to "seriously deal with the comments made by the Zionist regime leaders... and come up with real solutions to neutralise such approaches."

Tehran does not recognise Israel and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has drawn international condemnation for repeatedly saying the Jewish state should be wiped off the map.

Israel captured east Jerusalem during the 1967 war and annexed it shortly after a move not recognised by the international community. The Palestinians want east Jerusalem as the capital of their future state.

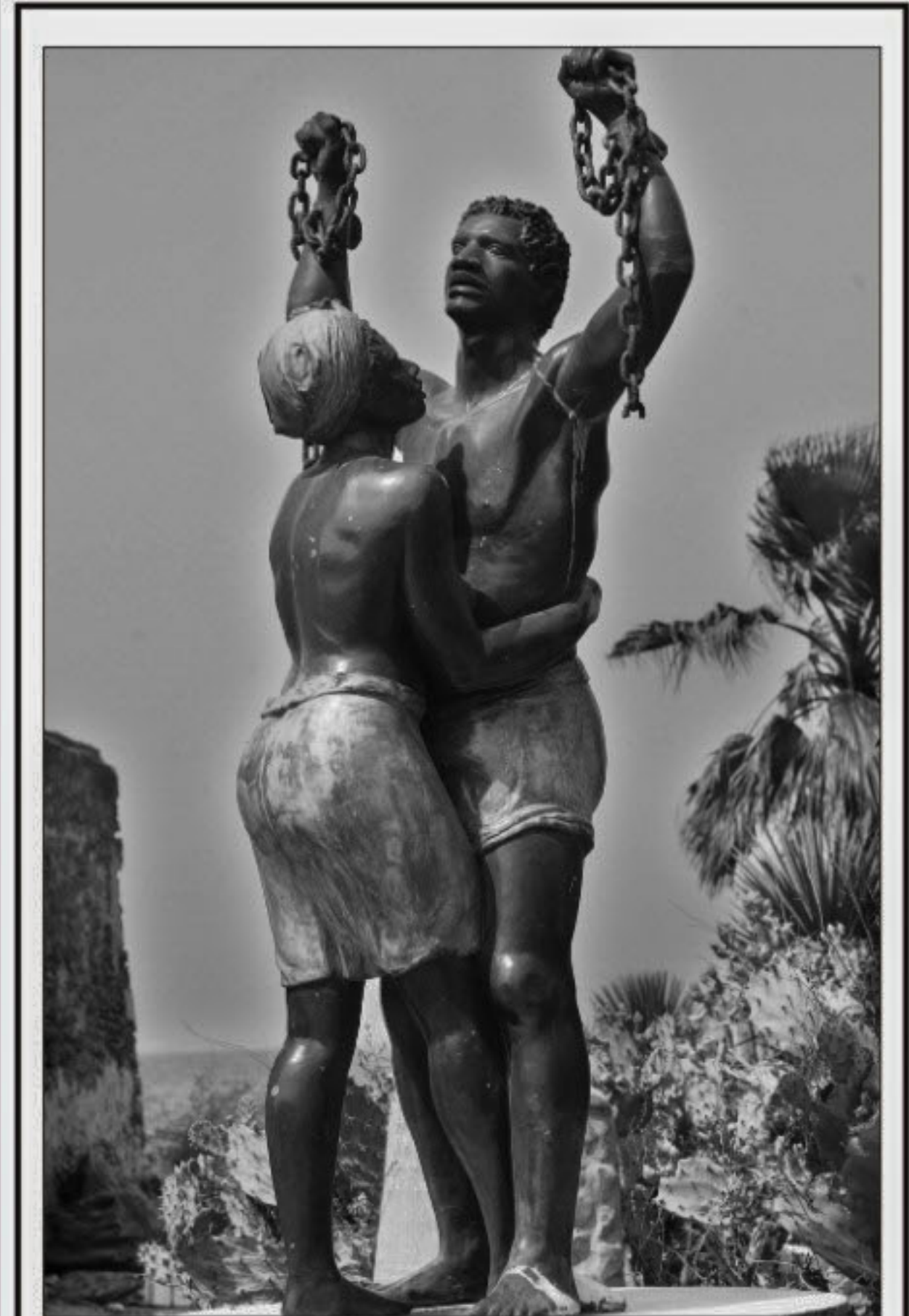


PHOTO: AFP

This file photo shows the liberation from slavery statue in a street of Dakar, where thousands of African slaves were held. The first of millions of slaves shipped from Africa to America from the west African nation and a law passed on March 23, 2010 declares slavery a crime against humanity.

N Korea threatens 'nuke strikes' on S Korea, US

AP, Seoul

North Korea's military threatened South Korea and the United States yesterday with "unprecedented nuclear strikes" as it expressed anger over a report the two countries plan to prepare for possible instability in the totalitarian country, a scenario it dismissed as a "pipe dream."

The North routinely issues such warnings. Diplomats in South Korea and the US have repeatedly called on Pyongyang to return to international negotiations aimed at ending its nuclear programs.

"Those who seek to bring down the system in the (North), whether they play a main role or a passive role, will fall victim to the unprecedented nuclear strikes of the invincible army," North Korea's military said in comments carried by the official Korean Central News Agency.

The North, believed have enough weaponised plutonium for at least half a dozen atomic bombs, conducted its second atomic test last year, drawing tighter UN sanctions.

Experts from South Korea, the US and China will meet in China next month to share information on North Korea, assess possible contingencies in the country, and consider ways to cooperate in case of an emergency situation, South Korea's Dong-a Ilbo newspaper reported earlier this month, citing unidentified sources in Seoul and Beijing. The experts will also hold follow-up meetings in Seoul in June and in Honolulu in July, it said.