

Obama presses world to lock down nuke materials

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama told world leaders yesterday to agree on locking down atomic bomb materials to prevent the "catastrophe" of nuclear terrorism.

"Today is an opportunity, not simply to talk, but to act," Obama said. "Not simply to make pledges, but to make real progress for the security of our people."

Obama was addressing the leaders of 46 nations on the second day of the summit in Washington, the biggest summit hosted by a US president in more than six decades.

The US president wants the world's military and often loosely guarded civilian stockpiles of uranium and plutonium to be accounted for and secured within four years.

Saying that terrorists could kill thousands with radioactive material just "the size of an apple," Obama warned that talk was not enough.

"Terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda have tried to



US President Barack Obama (L) greets Prime Minister of the Republic of India Manmohan Singh (R) at the Nuclear Security Summit on Monday in Washington, DC. President Obama hosted leaders of the 47 nations for the two-day summit to discuss solutions to cut down nuclear weapons around the world.

PHOTO: AFP

acquire the material for a nuclear weapon, and if they ever succeed, they would surely use it," he said. "It would be a catastrophe for the world."

Leaders at the summit were expected to issue a joint communiqué pledging coordinated action on locking down the world's nuclear stockpiles.

On Monday, ex-Soviet Ukraine gave Obama's initiative a relatively small, but concrete boost by pledging to surrender all its weapons-grade uranium. Canada announced a similar plan, as had Chile earlier.

The two-day gathering also saw Obama meet Monday with Chinese President Hu Jintao for talks on Iran's nuclear program, which Washington says is masking a secret bomb-making drive.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who is in Washington, said meanwhile that his country could never give up its nuclear weapons "on a unilateral basis, in a world as dangerous as the one in which we live today."

Red Shirts vow action as govt accuses Thaksin

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's "Red Shirts" pledged to step up their protest campaign yesterday as pressure mounted on the prime minister to end a tense standoff that descended into deadly violence at the weekend.

The government accused ousted former leader Thaksin Shinawatra of stoking the unrest in the heart of Bangkok that left 21 people dead and has prompted growing international alarm, with Asean making unusually strong comments.

The head of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), Surin Pitsuwan, added his voice to the concerns.

"The situation is affecting confidence in the security and stability of the region and if it is left to fester and escalate, it could lead to more violence and losses of lives," said Surin, a former Thai foreign minister.

The Reds said they would turn up the heat again on Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva after a few days of uneasy calm in the capital, vowing fresh action on Wednesday in their bid to force immediate elections.

"We'll put pressure on the government again to dissolve parliament," said one of the red-clad movement's leaders, Nattawut Saikuar. "We'll advance our push to kick out this government."

He called on the military "to stop sheltering" Abhisit, suggesting the protesters could march on an army base again.

Days after the country's worst civil violence in almost two decades, happier scenes returned to the capital as revellers splashed each other with water and daubed their faces with clay to celebrate the traditional Thai new year.

Tourists and locals ran around the popular Khaosan Road backpacker strip aiming water guns next to a memorial for the victims of Saturday's nearby bloodshed.

Thousands of Reds remained camped out in two sites in central Bangkok, where they have blocked traffic and caused some shops to shutter their doors, in rolling rallies that have already dealt a heavy blow to the vital tourist sector.

China cools push for sanctions on Iran

AFP, Washington

China said yesterday sanctions were not the answer to the Iranian atomic standoff, denting US President Barack Obama's hopes of sealing a deal to punish Tehran as he hosted a summit on nuclear arms.

Obama was expected to urge world leaders to harden their resolve to lock down nuclear material on the second day of a 47-nation summit in Washington aimed at keeping atomic weapons out of terrorist hands.

However the conference threatened to be overshadowed by growing tension on Iran, which the United States and its allies accuse of covertly working on a nuclear weapon. Iran says it is pursuing only civilian power.

The two-day gathering saw Obama meet Monday with Chinese President Hu Jintao and others in consultations he described as "impressive", buoyed by Ukraine's renouncement of its bomb-grade uranium.

"I think it's an indication of how deeply concerned everybody should be with the possibilities of nuclear traffic," Obama told reporters.

A top White House official said Obama and Hu agreed their delegations would work together at the United Nations on a push to impose sanctions against Iran.

"They are prepared to work with us," said Jeff Bader, Obama's top official responsible for East Asia on the National Security Council.

"The two presidents agreed the two delegations should work together on sanctions."

However China, a veto-wielding member of the Security Council, undercut hopes for a consensus when it said sanctions were not a solution.

"China always believes that dialogue and negotiation are the best way out for the issue. Pressure and sanctions cannot fundamentally solve it," foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters.

Jiang said China backs a "dual-track strategy" -- continued dialogue with Tehran while considering the possibility of sanctions if that fails to halt sensitive nuclear work.

Iran also denied any suggestion that China was now backing the US stance.

"We have a different understanding than yours of the comments made after the meeting of US and Chinese officials," foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said in Tehran when asked to react to US claims of a breakthrough.

Last week at the UN, envoys of Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany discussed a draft resolution sanctioning Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guards, and agreed to meet again soon.

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