

Iran, Brazil, Turkey to discuss nuke fuel swap

AFP, Tehran

The foreign ministers of Iran, Brazil and Turkey will meet in Istanbul today to discuss a nuclear fuel swap proposal they brokered in May, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman said.

Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki will meet with his Brazilian and Turkish counterparts, Celso Amorim and Ahmet Davutoglu, "in Istanbul tomorrow morning to discuss... the Tehran Declaration about the fuel swap," ministry spokesman Ramtin Mehmanparast was quoted as saying by ISNA news agency.

The Istanbul meeting will be the first between the three sides since the United Nations Security Council imposed a fourth set of sanctions against Iran on June 9 over its controversial nuclear drive.

North declares 'sacred war' on US and South Korea

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it would begin a "sacred war" against the United States and South Korea at "any time necessary" based on its nuclear deterrent, in response to "reckless" military exercises by the allies.

North Korea has driven tensions on the Korean peninsula to new heights after the South accused the North of sinking one of its warships in March, killing 46, and took steps to boost its defense including massive military drills with the United States.

Pyongyang customarily voiced shrill anger in the past when the allies conducted exercises, but US officials said further provocations are possible, especially as the North tries to

build political momentum for succession of power to Kim Jong-il's son.

US and South Korean militaries begin large-scale naval and aerial drills today with a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier taking part and they have additional exercises planned in August.

"The army and people of the DPRK will start a retaliatory sacred war of their own style based on nuclear deterrent any time necessary in order to counter the US imperialists and the South Korean puppet forces deliberately pushing the situation to the brink of a war," the North's National Defense Commission said.

DPRK is short for Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"All these war manoeuvres are nothing but outright provocations aimed to stifle the DPRK by force of

arms to all intents and purposes," the powerful commission said in a statement carried by the North's official KCNA news agency.

It again denied that the country was behind the sinking of South Korea's corvette Cheonan, and said the planned military drills were "as reckless an act as waking up a sleeping tiger."

SIX-PARTY TALKS Washington brushed off the latest threat and said it had no interest in getting into a war of words. "What we need from North Korea is fewer provocative words and more constructive action," State Department spokesman PJ Crowley said.

The North escaped rebuke by the UN Security Council, which condemned the attack in a statement

early in July without directly blaming the Pyongyang government.

An official speaking on the sidelines of a multilateral Asian forum in Vietnam last week said the US-South Korean drills also violated the spirit of the UN statement, which called for dialogue to ease tensions.

North Korea has called for the resumption of six-party nuclear disarmament talks that it had boycotted since late 2008, a move analysts said was an attempt to put the Cheonan incident behind and win lucrative aid through a deal with the South, the United States, Japan, Russia and China.

North Korea again on Saturday said that it was prepared to engage in talks with regional powers and take strong physical actions against any sanctions.

"If the US puts sword to us, we will put sword to them, which is how we counteract. We are ready for both talks and wars. We are not the one who would be surprised by military threats or sanctions," North Korean foreign ministry spokesperson said in a statement carried by KCNA.

The United States and South Korea have rejected the call and said Pyongyang must first prove that it is genuinely interested in change by first apologizing for sinking the Cheonan.

Following talks in Seoul on Wednesday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced fresh sanctions on North Korea aimed at freezing its assets earned from illicit activities including arms trade and cut off the flow of cash to its leaders.

CHINA RIVERS SWELL Evacuated 1,00,000 as rains

AFP, Beijing

China has evacuated more than 100,000 people as a river burst its banks and heavy rains continued in flood-hit regions along the perilously swollen Yangtze River, state media said yesterday.

China is grappling with its worst flooding in a decade, with at least 1,100 people killed or missing this year, and Premier Wen Jiabao warned Saturday of possibly worse to come during an inspection tour of flood-hit Hubei province.

Warning the situation was at a "crucial stage," Wen called for stepped-up flood prevention amid expected further flooding, according to a state TV report that showed him wading through knee-deep Yangtze floodwaters in the city of Wuhan.

Vietnam's forgotten war victims

NEWS ANALYSIS

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

When Hillary

Clinton, the US secretary of state, visited Vietnam on Thursday she extolled the country's "unlimited potential" and strong trade relations with the US. But the words must have rung hollow for Nguyen Ngoc Phuong, who has seen his potential destroyed by American chemical poisoning.

Phuong, 19, was born long after the US cut and run from the Vietnam war, evacuating its last remaining personnel by helicopter from the roof of its Saigon embassy in 1975.

But the results of that war, which officially ended 35 years ago, affect every aspect of Phuong's life.

The young man has severe physical deformities, and like an estimated three million Vietnamese, he suffers from exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic chemical US forces sprayed during the war to defoliate the dense jungles Viet Cong rebels used for cover.

In its manufacture, the chemical was contaminated with TCDD, or dioxin, "the most toxic substance known to humans", according to an investigation in the journal Science.

In his book Agent Orange on Trial published by Harvard University Press, Peter Schuck reported that companies who manufactured the defoliant knew "as early as 1952" that deadly dioxin had contaminated the chemical.

Between 1962 and 1971, the US military sprayed an estimated 80 million litres of Agent Orange and other herbicides on Vietnam, the journal Nature reported in 2003.

"I met one family of victims with four blinded children, no eyes - period," Dr Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, a Vietnamese researcher, said in a 2007 interview.

In a now declassified report for the US department of veterans affairs, Admiral ER Zumwalt Jr wrote that Dow Chemical and other manufacturers knew Agent Orange exposure could cause "general organ toxicity" and "other systematic problems" as early as 1964.

These and other studies show that the American military, and the chemical companies who serviced it, were well aware of the dangers posed by the chemicals on the general population.

On this front, Agent Orange elucidates an alarming trend in modern warfare, particularly counter-insurgency fighting: civilians and the

environment tend to be main casualties.

Brutality clearly defined World War I and II and previous conflicts between standing armies, but soldiers usually made up the majority of the dead.

From the jungles of Vietnam to the plains of Sudan, Iraq's cities to the Afghan mountains, civilians now bear the highest cost for wars not of their making.

"In Vietnam it was chemical [weapons] ... Agent Orange and napalm," Len Aldis, secretary of the Britain-Vietnam friendship society, told Al Jazeera.

"In Iraq, Kosovo, [and] Afghanistan the US, UK and Nato have used depleted uranium, cluster weapons ... and drones that are controlled from military bases in the US."

"We did a number of soil samples and followed [dioxin contamination from Agent Orange spraying] through the food chain into ponds, to fish, into ducks and then into humans. We found it in children who had been born long after the war ended," Dr Wayne Dwernychuck, who led the first team of western scientists to study the long-term effects of spraying in Vietnam, said in an interview.

"We concluded the only way they could be contaminated is through food and nursing," he said, referencing his 1994 study.

Former US military bases including Bien Hoa, Phu Cat and the infamous Danang are the worst sites of present day contamination.

"We have been working with Vietnam for about nine years to try to remedy the effects of Agent Orange," Clinton said at a press conference in Hanoi.

Since 2007, the US congress has appropriated \$9m to help Vietnam clean up contaminated areas and for related health activities, or an amount roughly equal to the cost of 12 Tomahawk cruise missiles.

In June, a joint panel of US and Vietnamese policymakers, citizens and scientists estimated the cost of a proper clean-up and rehabilitation for the sick at \$300m.

"The war is over but the wounds from the war still remain in many areas of Vietnam," Nguyen Van Son, a member of Vietnam's National Assembly, said during the report's launch in Hanoi.

Vietnamese civilians are not the only ones suffering from exposure. Veterans in the US, Canada and beyond also have histories with the chemicals.

Girls fancy dressed in colonial fashion participate in a school parade in Lima on Friday, during the last day of classes before the mid-year vacations, ahead of the Independence Day on July 28.

PHOTO: AFP



British PM asked to discuss Koh-i-Noor return to India

IANS, London

Keith Vaz, the Indian-origin British MP, wants the Koh-i-Noor diamond to be returned to India and asks Prime Minister David Cameron to discuss the issue of its return during his visit to India next week.

Vaz said in a statement: "I believe that this is the perfect opportunity for the prime minister to discuss the issue of the Koh-i-Noor. It would be very fitting for the Koh-i-Noor to return to the country in which it was mined so soon after the diamond jubilee of the Indian republic and 161 years after its removal from India."

Vaz said the return of the treasure to India would give meaning to the new coalition government's desire to enter into a new era of partnership with India. "This will certainly convey a new age of Indo-British relations. The

prime minister will certainly win the hearts of all Indians if he is prepared to discuss the display of the Koh-i-Noor in India itself, and possibly even its permanent return."

The diamond was taken to England in 1849 following the defeat of the ruler of the Punjab region, Duleep Singh, and the annexation of the Punjab. As part of the Treaty of Lahore settlement, the gem was surrendered to Queen Victoria. It was last worn in public by the late Queen Mother and last seen set inside the Maltese Cross on the crown placed on top of the coffin at her funeral.

Since Indian independence, there have been several requests for the return of the gem to what all Indians consider its home in India. The latest was the demand made by the Archaeological Survey of India last month.

Peru declares emergency over cold weather

BBC ONLINE

The Peruvian government has declared a state of emergency in more than half the country due to cold weather.

Most of the areas affected are in the south, where temperatures regularly drop below zero centigrade at this time of year.

However, this time temperatures have dropped to as low as -24C. The state of emergency means regional authorities can dip into emergency funds to provide medicine, blankets and shelter to those most affected.

The state of emergency was declared in 16 of Peru's 24 regions. This week Peru's capital, Lima, recorded its lowest temperatures in 46 years at 8C, and the emergency measures apply to several of its outlying districts.

In Peru's hot and humid Amazon region, temperatures dropped as low as 9C. The jungle region has recorded five cold spells this year.

Hundreds of people - nearly half of them very young children - have died of cold-related diseases, such as pneumonia, in Peru's mountainous south where temperatures can plummet at night to -20C.

BP oil spill work on hold as Bonnie enters Gulf of Mexico

REUTERS, Houston

The approach of a storm forced BP Plc to halt efforts to permanently plug its blown-out oil well in the Gulf of Mexico, but the storm appeared yesterday to be losing its punch.

Two rigs stopped drilling the relief wells intended to halt the leak for good and had prepared to move out of the storm's path.

The US National Hurricane Center said Tropical Depression Bonnie was less likely to redevelop into a tropical storm and could degenerate into an area of low pressure later yesterday.

"We think that the system no longer has a threat of becoming a tropical storm again," said Lixion Avila, a senior forecaster at the Miami-based hurricane centre.

Ships collecting seismic and acoustic data on the capped well and those operating underwater robots that provide a live feed of the wellhead would be the last to leave, and could stay if seas do not become too rough, officials said.

Bonnie was downgraded from a tropical storm to a depression as it weakened on its trek across Florida into the Gulf on Friday. Avila said Bonnie could dissipate into a broad area of low pressure if its sustained winds fall another 5 miles per hour or so later on Saturday morning.

The storm was on course to make landfall between the Louisiana coast and Florida's northwest Panhandle late on Saturday.

"If we have to evacuate the scene we're probably looking at a very limited window -- probably 48 hours," said retired Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, the top US spill official, said on Friday.

The ruptured deep-sea well -- a mile under the ocean surface -- is located off the coast of Louisiana.

BP sealed the leak last week with a tight-fitting containment cap, choking off the flow of oil for the first time since an April 20 rig explosion killed 11 workers and sent crude spewing into the Gulf, soiling coastlines in five US states and devastating tourism and fishery industries.

The evacuation may push back BP's mid-August target date for completing a relief well that would permanently plug the ruptured well to late August. But the ruptured well will remain capped, easing fears the flow would resume.

The evacuation also delayed another potential solution, the launch of a "static kill" operation to pump heavy drilling mud and possibly cement into the well.

BP's spill, the worst in US history, is believed to have spewed more than five million barrels of oil into the Gulf.



PHOTO: AFP

This photo shows the reconstruction from the skeletal remains of a woman known as the "Mujer de las Palmas" who lived during the ice age, 10,000 years ago on Yucatan Peninsula in what is now Mexico. It is presently on display at an exhibition on climate change in Guanajuato, Mexico.



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