

Iran unveils long-range drone

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran unveiled a prototype long-range unmanned bomber yesterday, the latest in a stream of announcements of new Iranian-made military hardware as tensions mount over its nuclear programme.

On a stage in front of military officials, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pulled a sheet away from the aircraft, called the Karrar, which Iran says is its first long-range drone.

With the United States and Israel saying they do not rule out a military strike to stop Iran getting a nuclear bomb, the Islamic Republic has showed off new mini-submarines, a surface-to-surface missile and announced plans to launch high altitude satellites over the next three years.

The presentation of the drone came a day after Iranian and Russian technicians began fuelling Iran's first nuclear power station, something Israel called "totally unacceptable."

In a speech at the unveiling ceremony, Ahmadinejad said Iran should seek the ability to make pre-emptive strikes against a perceived threat, although he said it would never strike first.



This undated photo released yesterday, by the Iranian Defense Ministry, claims to show the launch of the long-range drone, dubbed Karar by the Iranian armed forces, at an undisclosed location.

Peace with Palestinians doable

Says Netanyahu

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday a settlement with the Palestinians would be "difficult but achievable," as he addressed a sceptical Israeli public on revived US-sponsored peace talks.

"I know there is a lot of doubt after the 17 years which have passed since the start of the Oslo (peace) process," he told reporters at the start of a weekly cabinet meeting. "It's understandable why such scepticism exists."

Netanyahu and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas have accepted a US invitation to relaunch direct peace negotiations in Washington on September 2 following a 20-month hiatus.

It will be the latest in a series of attempts since secret talks in the Norwegian capital produced a 1993 "Declaration of Principles" on autonomy with the goal of a peace agreement which has yet to materialise.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's announcement on Friday of yet another relaunch was welcomed by Netanyahu but received without enthusiasm by a jaded Israeli media.

The main Friday evening television news ran only a brief report, devoting far more airtime to a row over who should be Israel's next armed forces chief and a regional heat wave.

Sunday's Israeli newspapers, the first to be published since the announcement, were equally low-key, with most popular dailies carrying the news on inside pages with gloomy commentaries.

"Many words have passed between the sides over the past 17 years," columnist Nahum Barnea wrote in the mass-circulation Yediot Aharonot. "Between the words there were not a few dead and wounded, and still there is no peace agreement."

Australia could soon return to polls with no final result

AFP, Sydney

Australia's parliament, deadlocked following inconclusive weekend elections, may leave the next government crippled and lead to fresh elections within 18 months, analysts said yesterday.

Labor and the opposition Liberal/National alliance were set for a dead heat of 73 seats each, falling short of the 76 needed for a majority, according to public broadcaster ABC.

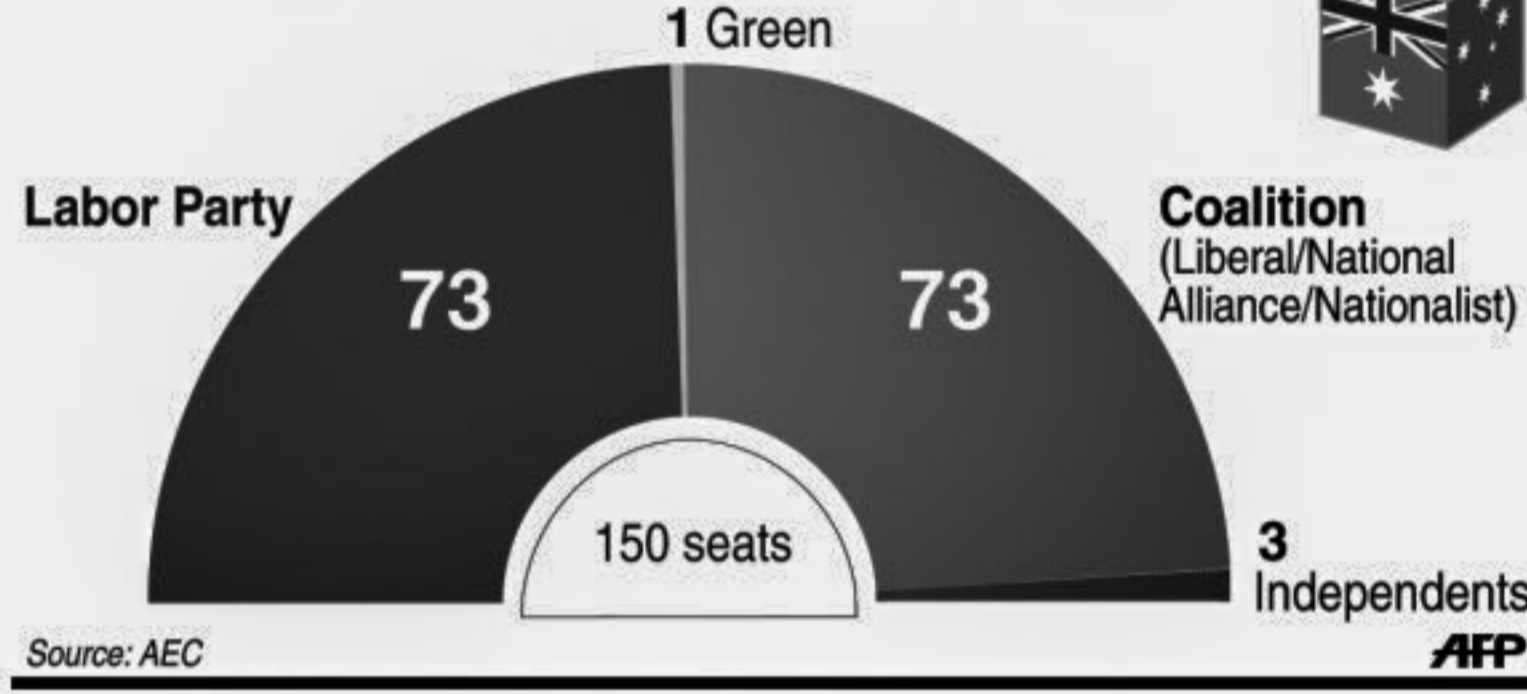
Neither side conceded defeat, with Julia announcing her intention to form a government as she began talks with a handful of newly influential minority members of parliament.

The independent MPs and one Greens lawmaker who now hold the balance of power were coy about their intentions, and one of them said the horse-trading could take days or weeks to play out.

The heavy swing of around 5.0 per cent against Labor comes despite its successful stewardship of the Australian economy, which was dubbed the "won-

Australian Election 2010

Projected seats in Parliament with 78.13% of vote counted



der from Down Under" for escaping the global financial crisis without recession.

It could be two weeks before the definitive results of Saturday's poll are known, experts said, but bargaining with independent and minority lawmakers began in earnest Sunday, with their support critical in a hung

parliament.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard, battling to hang onto power, and conservative opposition leader Tony Abbott were both trying to cobble a coalition government.

Up to five minor and unaligned MPs are left with the balance of power, and their decisions will be key not only to

who ultimately gains the numbers to form government, but also what direction the next parliament will take.

"We're probably looking at a short-term government. This is a recipe for a lot of instability, a lot of uncertainty," explained political analyst Norman Abjorensen, from the Australian National University.

The opposition defied its own expectations Saturday, achieving a five per cent swing which took it to within a whisker of a parliamentary majority, just three years after being wiped out in a decisive Labor win.

But while Julia's Labor were stripped of their majority, Liberal/National head Abbott also looked certain to fall short of the 76 seats required to govern in his own right.

The situation will be resolved through delicate negotiations with the independents and left-wing Greens party, and will likely involve concessions on issues such as broadband and climate change, said pundit Nick Economou.

Psychic crocodile picks Julia for polls win

BBC ONLINE

A saltwater crocodile called Dirty Harry has used his supposed psychic powers to predict that Julia Gillard will win Saturday's tight general election in Australia.

The reportedly clairvoyant reptile made his decision in his pen in Darwin.

Spurning the raw chicken dangling below a picture of opposition leader Tony Abbott, Harry went for the snack under PM Julia Gillard's image.

The huge reptile has a good track record, his keepers say.

The 5m (16ft) crocodile took several minutes to make up his mind, before lunging out of the water at his target.

"Harry's come over to the air, he's lifted his head in the air and he's just nailed Gillard as clean as you want," crocodile handler Nigel Palmer told AFP news agency.

PM begins task to build coalition

BBC ONLINE

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard has held initial talks with independent candidates to try to form a government after an inconclusive election.

Ms Gillard said she would continue to provide "stable" government as final votes are counted.

She acknowledged that neither her Labor Party nor the opposition conservative coalition was likely to win the 76 seats needed for an outright majority.

Australia's ABC is forecasting 72 seats for Labor and 73 for the conservatives.

With 78% of votes counted, Labor is already set to win 72 seats, and Tony Abbott's Liberal/National coalition is on course for 70, according to national broadcaster ABC.

"It is clear that neither party has earned the right to government in its own right," Ms Gillard said. She added that Labor had won the most votes overall nationally, if minor parties are discounted.

But opposition leader Tony Abbott, said it was clear Labor had lost its parliamentary majority and its legitimacy.

"There was a savage swing against this government," he said. Abbott said he had also made contact with the independents candidates.

The election comes two months after Ms Gillard ousted Kevin Rudd in a controversial leadership challenge.

Australia has not elected a hung parliament since 1940.

A handful of members of parliament now appear to hold the balance of power. They include three independents, a Green Party candidate, and an independent whose seat is not yet confirmed.

Wikileaks founder points at Pentagon over rape claims

AFP, Stockholm

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange said in an interview published Sunday he believed the Pentagon could be behind a rape allegation against him that was swiftly dropped by Swedish authorities.

His comments came as prosecutors justified their treatment of the 39-year-old Australian, whose whistleblowing website is embroiled in a row with Washington over the publication of secret Afghan war documents.

The Aftonbladet newspaper quoted Assange as saying he did not know who was "hiding behind" the rape claim, which prompted prosecutors to issue a warrant for his arrest on Friday but which was cancelled the following day.



"But we have been warned that for instance the Pentagon will use dirty tricks to destroy us. I have furthermore been warned about set-up sex traps," he said, in a translation of comments published in Swedish.

The former computer hacker described the allegations as "shocking" and said he had "never, neither in Sweden nor in any other country, had sex with someone in a way which wasn't completely voluntary on both sides."

Activists wearing masks pretend to read newspapers upside down during a silent protest to support freedom of the press outside a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Malaysia was ranked 131st out of 175 countries in the 2009 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) press freedom index because of its tight controls on print and broadcast media.

PHOTO: AFP



Chinese PM calls for political reform

REUTERS, Beijing

China has to pursue political reform to safeguard its economic health, Premier Wen Jiabao said during a visit to the booming town of Shenzhen, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Wen's call for political reform lacked specifics. But his comments reflect broader worries that unless the Party embraces at least limited reforms to make officials more answerable, then corruption and abuses may erode the country's economic prospects.

"Without the safeguarding of political restructuring, China may lose what it has already achieved through economic restructuring and the targets of its modernization drive might not be reached," Wen was quoted by Xinhua as saying.

Rain batters China anew; 94,000 evacuated in flood

AP, Beijing

Flooding killed four people and forced the evacuation of 94,000 others in the northern Chinese port city of Dandong after heavy rains caused the Yalu river to breach its banks, state media said yesterday.

Rain continued to fall Sunday in the region, which borders North Korea, but the official Xinhua News Agency reported that water levels along the Yalu and its tributaries dropped below flood warning levels.

Xinhua said four people died, including a couple in their 70s and a mother and son, after their homes were swept away by flash floods. An official with the Water Resources Department in Liaoning province, where Dandong is located, confirmed that four people had died though he was unable to provide details. He refused to give his name because he was not authorized to speak with the media.

On Saturday, floodwaters punctured a dike between the river and an economic development zone in Dandong, inundating many neighbourhoods.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said torrential rain and water from the overflowing Yalu or Amnok as it is known in Korean swamped houses, public buildings and farmland in more than five villages near Sinuiju, the city opposite Dandong.

The report described Sinuiju and the surrounding area as having been "severely affected" by the flooding and said officials, the military and ordinary civilians were involved in rescue work. It said at least 5,150 people had been evacuated and residents were clambering on rooftops or taking shelter on hilltops.

Much of North Korea's trade with the world passes through the city, forming a vital lifeline for the isolated, economically struggling country. Flooding in previous years has destroyed crops and pushed North Korea deeper into poverty, increasing its dependence on international food aid.

For China, the Dandong flooding is the latest disaster in the country's worst flood season in over a decade. Landslides caused by heavy rains have smothered communities in western China and accounted for most of the more than 2,500 people killed.

Saudi man 'faces spine-op punishment'

BBC ONLINE

Amnesty International has urged Saudi authorities to stop any attempt to medically paralyse a man as a judicial punishment.

A Saudi judge is reported to have asked hospitals if it is possible to cut the spinal cord of the man, found guilty of paralyzing another man in a fight.

Amnesty said intentionally paralyzing someone would constitute torture.

Under Islamic law in Saudi Arabia, retribution sentences can include eye-gouging and, for murder, beheading.

"We urge the Saudi Arabian authorities not to carry out such a punishment, which amounts to nothing less than torture," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, of Amnesty International.

BP told to submit blow-out preventer removal plan

REUTERS, Houston

BP Plc will remove a failed blow-out preventer from its ruptured Macondo well in the Gulf of Mexico under watchful eyes of investigators probing the deadly April 20 explosion, the top US official overseeing the oil spill said.

Retired Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen told BP to submit a removal plan in a directive issued late Friday and made public on Saturday after a 48-hour pressure test indicated the giant stack of pipes and valves could be removed and replaced with another with little likelihood of an oil leak.

The plan must say how BP will contain a leak if necessary, Allen said.

The blow-out preventer is key evidence subpoenaed by federal investigators seeking the cause of the Deepwater Horizon explosion that killed 11 workers and unleashed the world's worst offshore oil spill.

More than 4 million barrels of oil spewed into the Gulf, contaminating wetlands, fishing grounds and beaches from Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle.

No oil has leaked since July 15, when BP sealed shut a provisional cap over the wellhead.

DIFFERENT bites

Van Gogh's picture still missing

BBC ONLINE

A Van Gogh painting worth \$50 million stolen from a Cairo museum is still missing, Egypt's culture minister says.

Earlier Farouk Hosni had said two Italians had been arrested at Cairo airport, and the small canvas found.

But later he said he had been given "inaccurate" information, and the painting was still missing.

The painting - known as Both Poppy Flowers and Vase And Flowers - was "cut from its frame" at the Mahmoud Khalil Museum on Saturday, Hosni said.

Astronauts as weak as 80-year-olds in space

AP, Cape Canaveral

Astronauts can become as weak as 80-year-olds after six months at the International Space Station, according to a new study that raises serious health concerns as NASA contemplates prolonged trips to asteroids and Mars.

Marquette University biologist Robert Fitts, who led the study, stresses that the accelerated space aging is temporary: Astronauts' muscles recover after a few months back on Earth.

"I'd be concerned," Fitts said this week in an interview with The Associated Press.