

Six powers seek early nuclear talks with Iran

AFP, New York

The six powers seeking to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions prepared to review yesterday the latest UN sanctions against Tehran and mull its appeals to enter negotiations.

The New York meeting of the so-called P5-plus-1 -- the permanent five UN Security Council members plus Germany -- comes as Iran said it would soon be ready to discuss its nuclear program.

The talks were to involve US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her counterparts from the other five nations involved: Britain, China, France, Russia and Germany.

The United States has pressed hard for full enforcement of UN Security Council sanctions, but also has left the door open to talks over Iran's nuclear program and other issues.

Washington argues that the sanctions are biting, putting pressure on Tehran to return to negotiations.

To the extent that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is interested in talks, "all we would do is encourage him to call Lady (Catherine) Ashton and provide a date and a location," State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.

Ashton is the EU high representative, who is the main point of contact between Iran and the P5-plus-1.

Ahmadinejad, in New York to attend the UN General Assembly meeting, told media that his country was ready to resume talks with world powers over its program to enrich uranium.

The UN sanctions had also damaged the chances for an improvement in US-Iranian relations, he added. He blamed international politics for the growing tensions over the nuclear program.

"Iran's nuclear case is a political case," the New York Times quoted him as saying. "Otherwise, why would it be essential for the details of our nuclear program be made available to the media?"

The Iranian leader also was quoted as saying by the Atlantic magazine that the United States "doesn't understand what war looks like."

"When a war starts, it knows no limits," Ahmadinejad said in response to a question about any US-supported strike by Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The six powers met with Iran in Geneva in October 2009 and agreed on a nuclear fuel swap deal, which had been designed to build confidence as world powers pressed Iran to halt uranium enrichment.

But the agreement has since stalled, and in June the UN Security Council approved a fourth round of sanctions against the Islamic republic, which in turn said it would suspend talks until September.

"We are prepared to constructively engage Iran and would hope that Iran will be prepared to have the same kind of meeting that occurred last year," Crowley said, referring to the Geneva meeting.

Washington hoped the Iranians would go further and "actually commit themselves to try to address the concerns the international community has about the nature of the nuclear program," he added.

Tehran says it is pursuing a civilian energy program, but many Western powers suspect it is seeking nuclear weapons.

While attending UN meetings, German Chancellor Angela Merkel took a stern tone toward Tehran.

"Iran has not removed doubts" over whether its nuclear program is peaceful or not, Merkel said.



Two people inspect one of 25 pilot whales that died yesterday after beaching themselves at Spirits Bay, 320 kilometres northwest of Auckland, New Zealand.

PHOTO: AFP

UN secures \$40 billion for global health drive

AFP, UN

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced yesterday a 40-billion-dollar drive to improve the health of women and children, which he said would save millions of lives around the world.

Governments, philanthropists and private groups pledged the cash, giving a spectacular end to the UN summit on eliminating poverty, a campaign that has been badly battered by the international financial crisis.

"We know what works to save women's and children's lives, and we know that women and children are critical to all of the Millennium Development Goals," Ban said in a statement.

He estimated that his Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health could save 16 million lives by 2015.

Cutting the unnecessary deaths of women during pregnancy and childbirth and stopping the premature deaths of children under five are the two most slowest moving goals of the eight key development targets set a decade ago.

The UN said spending on women and children reduces poverty, stimulates growth and is a fundamental human right.

Some 140 world leaders and heads of state have attended the summit, and US President Barack Obama will close the meet.

Countries from Afghanistan to Zambia -- but also including Australia, Britain, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia and the United States -- have contributed to the drive.

The foundations of the world's richest men, Mexican tycoon Carlos Slim and Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates, were among the contributors. They joined rights groups such as Amnesty International and multinationals such as LG Electronics and Pfizer.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said investing in women and children's health was "an issue that deserves to be at the top of our development agenda."

A UN statement said the deaths of more than 15 million children under five would be saved between 2011 and 2015 through the initiative.

The UN Children's Fund, the World Health Organization and the World Bank are among international bodies that will help mobilize support for Ban's drive.

Ban said in a pre-summit interview that child and maternal health would be the top priorities in the final five years of the Millennium development campaign.

The three-day summit was called to rejuvenate the eight development targets set at the 2000 Millennium summit, aiming to be reached by 2015.

The goals set target of cutting by two thirds the number of children who die before they are five, and reducing the number of women who die during childbirth by three quarters.

The United Nations has estimated that at least 120 billion dollars will be needed over the next five years to meet the MDGs, which most experts predict will not be met by the 2015 target date.

Blast in Iranian city kills 12

REUTERS, Tehran

Twelve people were killed and dozens injured in an explosion among a crowd watching a military parade in a city in northwestern Iran yesterday, media reported.

"This bomb was a time-bomb planted on a tree among the people and it went off at 10:20 (0650 GMT)," the website of state-run television IRIB quoted a military official as saying.

IRIB said 10 people had died and at least 57 were injured.

No casualties were reported among the military personnel and political dignitaries attending the annual parade -- one of several held across the country to commemorate Iran's eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s.

Local officials blamed the blast on militants.

Kurdish militants have been active in the past in the region which borders Iraq and Turkey. Iranian forces have often clashed with Kurdish guerrillas some of whom operate out of bases in northern Iraq.

Arctic claims summit gets underway in Moscow

BBC ONLINE

An international meeting to try to prevent the Arctic becoming the next battleground over mineral wealth has begun in Moscow.

One quarter of the world's resources of oil and gas are believed to lie beneath the Arctic Ocean.

Russia, Norway, Canada, Denmark and the United States have already laid claim to territory in the region.

Some 300 delegates will discuss co-operation but are also likely to push their claims to the Arctic's riches.

The region's resources are rapidly becoming accessible due to the dramatic shrinking of the polar ice cap.

The race for the Arctic centres on an underwater mountain range known as the Lomonosov Ridge.

In 2001, Moscow submitted a territorial claim to the United Nations which was rejected because of lack of evidence.

Three years ago, a Russian expedition planted a titanium flag on the ocean floor beneath the North Pole in a

symbolic gesture of Moscow's ambitions.

Canada and Denmark are also planning to submit separate files to the UN.

As evidence of the gathering momentum in the race for mineral resources, Russia has announced it will spend \$64m (£40m; 48m euros) on research aimed at proving its case.

Last week, Canada's foreign minister met his Russian counterpart in Moscow to discuss their competing claims.

Canada said it was confident its case would prevail.

Two days earlier, Russia signed a treaty with Norway, ending a 40-year dispute over their maritime borders in the Barents Sea and Arctic Ocean.

Moscow said the prospects for oil and gas exploration were significant either side of the border.

For the states involved in the territorial dispute, the key lies in obtaining scientific proof that the Lomonosov Ridge is an underwater extension of their continental shelf.

Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, a coastal nation can claim exclusive economic rights to natural resources on or beneath the sea floor up to 200 nautical miles (370km) beyond their land territory.

But if the continental shelf extends beyond that distance, the country must provide evidence to a UN commission which will then make recommendations about establishing an outer limit.

Despite the evident scramble for territorial rights, Moscow has said it has no immediate plans for development and has emphasized the need for international cooperation.

Russian Arctic expert Lev Voronkov said the experience of the Cold War proved the need to work together.

"No one problem of contemporary Arctic can be resolved by one country alone. So that's why I think that we are doomed to co-operate in the Arctic. And military confrontation especially is completely counterproductive."



Detainees, one with his head resting on the edge of the roof (2nd R), reported by activists to be mainly Chinese nationals, sit on the roof of the Villawood detention centre during an immigration protest near Sydney yesterday. The fresh rooftop protest broke out at the Australian immigration detention centre, officials said, just hours after the end of another tense standoff that followed the suicide of an inmate.

PHOTO: AFP

Nigerian CEC wants vote delayed to April

REUTERS, Abuja

Nigeria's chief election commissioner formally asked yesterday for a three-month delay to January's presidential elections, saying more time was needed to iron out problems with voter registration.

"What is worth doing is worth doing well," Independent National Election Commission (INEC) Chairman Attahiru Jega said at a meeting with political parties to discuss possible delays to the January vote.

"If we are willing to give an extension up to March, our preference is that we should get an extension up to April because when we get this sufficient time, we will have enough room to do an excellent job," he said.

Africa's most populous nation is due to hold presidential, parliamentary and state governorship elections in January, but INEC has warned it is in a race against time to amend a deeply flawed electoral roll.

It said on Sunday the May 29 date for the inauguration of the winner of the presidential election would remain "sacrosanct" even if the voting timetable were amended.

President Goodluck Jonathan is the favorite to get the nomination for the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), which has won all three presidential races since the end of military rule in 1999.

But the struggle to secure the PDP ticket is more contentious than in previous years. The party has failed to reach a consensus over Jonathan, a southerner who inherited the top job when president Umaru Yar'Adua, a northerner, died earlier this year during his first term in office.

INEC's formal request for a delay must be approved by both chambers of Nigeria's National Assembly. However, political parties at the INEC meeting agreed to the need for more time, making postponement highly likely.

France investigates al-Qaeda claim of Niger kidnapping

BBC ONLINE

French intelligence agents are looking into a claim by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to have kidnapped seven foreign workers at a uranium mine in Niger.

A statement purportedly by the militant group said it would issue demands to the French government "shortly" and warned it against "anything stupid".

France has sent troops to hunt for the hostages, five of whom are French. The others are from Togo and Madagascar.

They were last seen heading towards Niger's borders with Mali and Algeria.

Two of the French nationals were employees of the French nuclear energy firm, Areva, which operates the mine near Arlit.

The other five hostages worked for a subsidiary of the French construction company, Vinci, which was a subcontractor there.

In an audio statement broadcast by al-Jazeera on Tuesday, a spokesman for al-Qaeda's North African offshoot said a group led by Sheikh Abu Zaid had managed to evade the tight security in place at Arlit and kidnapped "five French nuclear experts" early on Thursday.

"The men were able to attack the mine at Arlit, which is considered one of the world's most important sources of uranium that France has been stealing from for decades," Salah Abou Mohammed said.

"We claim responsibility for this blessed operation and tell the French government that the mujahideen will inform it with their legitimate demands at a later time."

"We also warn them from doing anything stupid," he added.

The French Defence Council later met at the Elysee Palace to discuss the statement, which has not yet been authenticated.

Niger's government said evidence suggested the kidnappers were affiliated to Abou Zaid, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali.

On Monday, France said it had dispatched 80 military personnel to Niger's capital, Niamey, to help search for the hostages.

Long-range Breguet Atlantique aircraft and a Mirage jet, equipped with sophisticated monitoring equipment, were also sent.

The hostages and their captors were last seen heading towards Inabangaret, an important well and stopping point in north-western Niger.

Settler guard kills Palestinian in east Jerusalem: police

AFP, Jerusalem

A Jewish settler guard shot dead a Palestinian after rocks were thrown at his car yesterday, setting off clashes with police in a tense neighbourhood in annexed Arab east Jerusalem.

"An Arab responsible for protecting Jewish residents of the neighbourhood opened fire with his pistol after his car was attacked with stones," police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said.

Witnesses said another two Palestinians were wounded in the shooting, and at least five other Palestinians were later injured as police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at stone-throwing protesters.

The guard had opened fire after his car was stopped at a barricade after Palestinians had set up. He was later detained for questioning, Rosenfeld said.

The man killed was identified as Samir Serhan. Rosenfeld said he had been detained in the past for "participation in unrest."

Palestinian residents and local officials said it was not clear what sparked the

violence, which erupted before dawn.

"We were awakened by the sound of gunfire at 4:00 am (0200 GMT) and when we came down we found Samir's body on the front steps... The police would not let us come near him," a cousin of the victim, Samir Serhan, said.

He said the family was told they would be able to recover the body of Samir, a father of five, from a police station later in the day.

Silwan, a crowded neighbourhood where a few dozen Jewish families live in a guarded enclave surrounded by 12,000 Arab residents, is one of the most volatile areas of east Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in 1967 and later annexed in a move not recognised by the international community.

Plans to demolish Palestinian homes to make way for an archaeological park have triggered violent protests in the past.

The Jerusalem city council gave the green light in June for the controversial project which would be under the control of Elad, a group dedicated to expanding Jewish ownership in east Jerusalem.

Under the plan, 22 homes would be

razed, while another 66 would be legalised.

The park is planned on what is believed to be the site of ancient Jerusalem during the reigns of the biblical kings David and Solomon. It is just outside the walls of the Old City, which contain some of the holiest sites in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Yesterday's shooting highlighted the challenges Israeli and Palestinian negotiators face in peace talks, which resumed on September 2 after a 20-month hiatus.

The international community considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, to be illegal.

The Palestinians want a freeze on all settlement construction but are also pushing for the renewal of a partial moratorium on settlement building that will end within days, even though it does not include east Jerusalem.

Israel does not consider Jewish residents of east Jerusalem to be settlers as it views the entire Holy City as its "eternal and indivisible capital."

Militants kill three police in Indonesia

AFP, Medan

Suspected Islamist militants killed three Indonesian police officers yesterday in apparent retaliation for the arrest and killing of members of their group, police said.

A least 12 gunmen stormed a police station at Hamparan Perak, near Medan on Sumatra island, and opened fire shortly after midnight, police spokesman Iskandar Hasan said.

"Three policemen were killed. It was a sudden attack and our officers weren't ready," he said, adding that two of the victims were riddled with bullets.

He described the gunmen as "very well trained".

"We all know that the trainers graduated from conflict areas including Afghanistan," he added.

The gunmen threw Molotov cocktails as they fled the scene, setting fire to a patrol car.

A witness told AFP the attack was swift and appeared to have been well-planned. The gunmen arrived on motorcycles and used hand signals to coordinate their movements, he said.

"I saw the riders enter the police station and went on the blue I heard bursts of gunfire that went on for about five minutes," local resident Lindung Ginting said.

"They looked very calm as they stepped out of the station. I saw them using hand signals to give commands."

Police believe the assailants are linked to a group targeted in a series of raids on Sunday, which resulted in the deaths of three alleged militants and the arrest of 15 others.

The group are suspected of killing a police officer in a bank robbery in Medan city last month to raise funds for terrorist attacks.

Police said 15 militants managed to escape Sunday's raids and remain at large.

Muslim-majority Indonesia is struggling to deal with the threat of homegrown Islamist militants who oppose the country's secular, democratic system and want to create a caliphate across much of Southeast Asia.

Iskandar said Islamic militancy was a "national problem".

"They target uneducated and poor people for recruitment. People with a lack of religious knowledge are a boon (to militants) because they're very easy to hire," he said.