

Iranian president sacks foreign minister

REUTERS, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dismissed his long-serving foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki on Monday and named one of his own close allies, Iran's nuclear chief, Ali Akbar Salehi, as his interim replacement.

The sacking of Mottaki is an indication of a struggle between the president and parliament in which the assembly has accused Ahmadinejad of concentrating more power in his own hands and riding roughshod over the views of lawmakers.

There was no indication, however, that the switch signalled any shift in Iran's nuclear policy or the broad lines of its foreign policy. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has the last word on nuclear policy and other matters of state.

"I appreciate your diligence and services as the foreign minister," state news agency IRNA quoted the hardline Ahmadinejad as saying in a letter to Mottaki.

Mottaki is viewed as an ally of conservative parliament speaker Ali Larijani, who lost to Ahmadinejad in the 2005 election and is now seen as the key rival of the president in his political battle with the assembly.

Ahmadinejad has delayed signing into law legislation passed by parliament, and held up funds due to be invested in Tehran, all the while insisting it is he who has precedence over the assembly within Iran's multi-layered political system.

Larijani, a critic of Ahmadinejad's economic policies, has tacitly urged Khamenei to rein him in, to little visible effect.

Prominent lawmakers have warned that they may take legal action against the president, and even impeach him, for his alleged disregard of the constitution. Some MPs accuse him of spending petro-dollars without parliamentary approval.



Youths, holding shields with titles of books, march during a protest to demand a change of government as parliament met to hold a crucial vote that could topple Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi yesterday in Rome. Berlusconi survived a crucial confidence vote in the lower house of parliament by 314 votes in favour and 311 against.

Berlusconi wins Senate vote

Lower house looms close

REUTERS, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi won a confidence motion in the Senate as expected yesterday, ahead of a lower house vote that could force him to resign or leave him clinging to a wafer-thin majority.

The centre-right government's secure majority in the upper house meant there was little doubt about the vote on a confidence motion it had called itself to underline its legitimacy. The government won by 162 votes to 135.

Shares in media company Mediaset, controlled by Berlusconi's family, recovered ground and turned positive after the initial vote.

But the result was just the first round in a showdown that will climax with a no-confidence vote in the lower house expected around 1230 GMT.

After a year overshadowed by corruption and sex scandals and an acrimonious split with former ally Gianfranco Fini that cost him a secure parliamentary majority, a day of reckoning has arrived for Berlusconi after two and a half years in power.

The 74-year-old media tycoon has repeatedly defied the sceptics, shrugging off a string of gaffes and scandals to win three elections and transform Italy's political landscape since gaining power for the first time in 1994.

Imelda to get her mansion back

AP, Manila



Former Philippine first lady Imelda Marcos said yesterday that she will have a merry Christmas

thanks to a court ordering the return of one of the sprawling mansions the government seized after her husband was deposed.

The Supreme Court ruled late Monday that the government agency created to recover billions of dollars allegedly looted by former dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife used a defective order to seize the beachfront, 104-acre (42-hectare) estate on Leyte Island.

The ruling came 24 years after a non-violent "people power" uprising ousted Marcos and the government sequestered most of their property.

Indian Muslims appeal against Ayodhya ruling

AFP, New Delhi

A Muslim group in India yesterday filed a petition with the Supreme Court challenging a ruling that divided a bitterly contested religious site between Hindus and Muslims.

A lower court in September ordered that the site in the northern pilgrimage town of Ayodhya -- which has been a flashpoint for deadly inter-religion violence -- would be split, with one third going to Muslims and the rest to Hindus.

"We feel the ruling was based on a number of incorrect assumption and the board considers it the right and obligation of Indian Muslims to challenge the judgment," Zafaryab Jeelani, a lawyer for the Sunni Wakf Board, told AFP.

The petition said the Muslims would not surrender their claim over the whole site in Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh.

In 1992, a 16th-century mosque on the site was razed by Hindu zealots, sparking riots that killed more than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, in some of the worst sectarian violence since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

Under the September ruling, Hindus would control the spot where they believe their god Ram was born and where the central dome of the razed mosque stood until 1992.

Hindu groups have also appealed to the Supreme Court to claim the entire site.

Since the destruction of the mosque 18 years ago, the area has been cordoned off with barbed wire and steel fencing and guarded by troops.

Japan to continue paying \$2b for US troops

AP, Tokyo

Japan's government agreed yesterday to continue contributing \$2.2 billion a year toward the cost of stationing American troops in the country.

Under the agreement with the United States, Japan's share will remain at the current 188 billion yen (\$2.2 billion) through March 2016. The current pact expires next March.

Japan had sought a cut in its payment during months of negotiations on the renewal because of economic woes. But officials agreed on no reduction after tensions on the Korean peninsula and worries over China's growing military might highlighted the US military's role as a deterrent for security threats.

"As both Japan and the US are in extremely tight fiscal conditions, we are striving to act under the spirit of our alliance," Japanese Defense Minister said.

Voyager near Solar System's edge

BBC ONLINE

Voyager 1, the most distant spacecraft from Earth, has reached a new milestone in its quest to leave the Solar System.

Now 17.4bn km (10.8bn miles) from home, the veteran probe has detected a distinct change in the flow of particles that surround it.

These particles, which emanate from the Sun, are no longer travelling outwards but are moving sideways.

It means Voyager must be very close to making the jump to interstellar space - the space between the stars.

Edward Stone, the Voyager project scientist, lauded the explorer and the fascinating science it continues to return 33 years after launch.

"When Voyager was launched, the space age itself was only 20 years old, so there was no basis to know that spacecraft could last so long," he told BBC News.

"We had no idea how far we would have to travel to get outside the Solar System. We now know that in roughly five years, we should be outside for the first time."

Dr Stone was speaking here at the American Geophysical Union (AGU) Fall Meeting, the largest gathering of Earth scientists in the world.

Voyager 1 was launched on 5 September 1977, and its sister spacecraft, Voyager 2, on 20 August 1977.

The Nasa probes' initial goal was to survey the outer planets Jupiter, Saturn,

packs, the probes' instruments continue to function well and return data to Earth, although the vast distance between them and Earth means a radio message now has a travel time of about

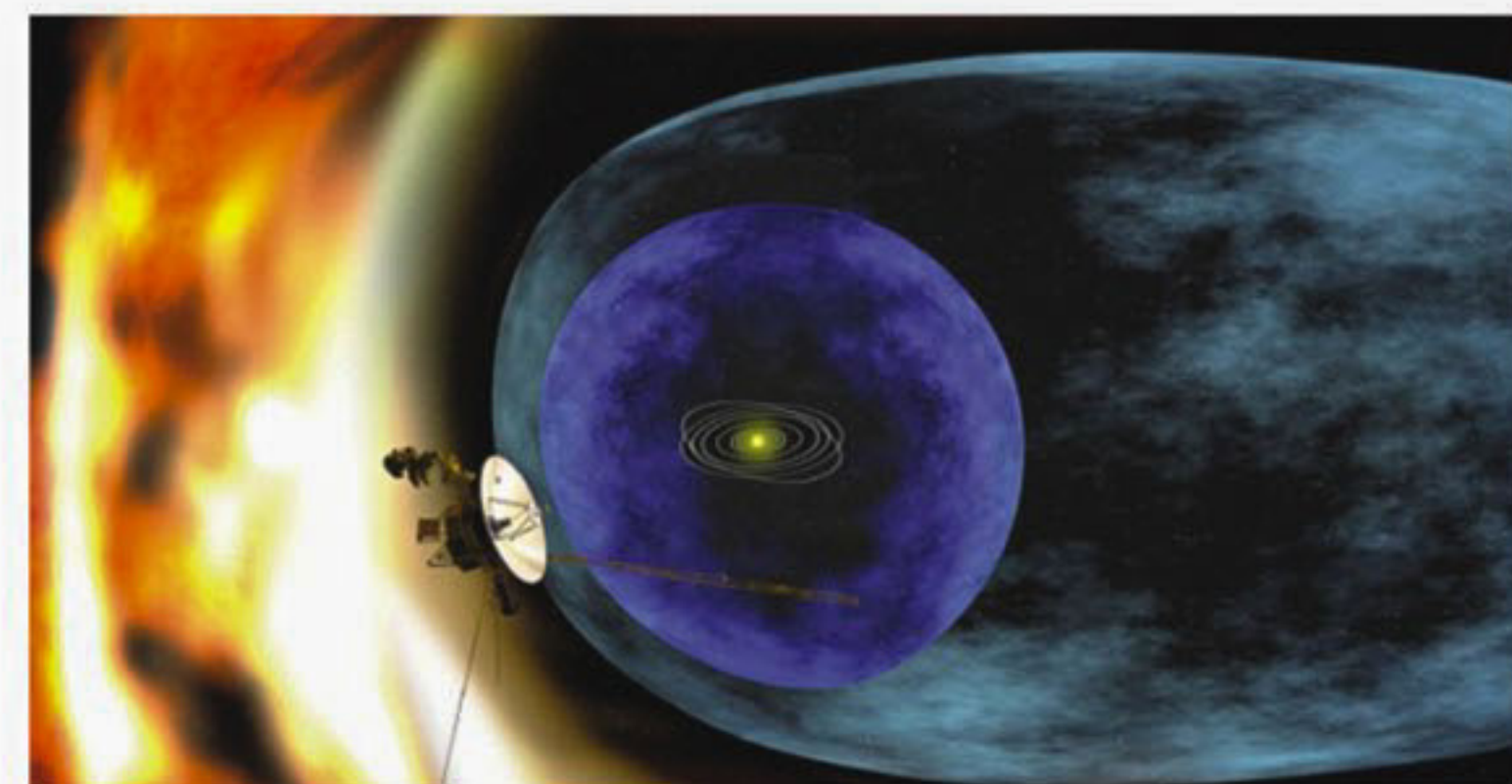


PHOTO: BBC ONLINE

Voyager is approaching the edge of the bubble of charged particles the Sun has thrown out into space

Uranus and Neptune, a task completed in 1989.

They were then despatched towards deep space, in the general direction of the centre of our Milky Way Galaxy. Sustained by their radioactive power

16 hours.

The newly reported observation comes from Voyager 1's Low-Energy Charged Particle Instrument, which has been monitoring the velocity of the solar wind.

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