

Iran now a nuclear state

Ahmadinejad declares

IANIS, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has said Iran is now a nuclear country and that it has achieved nuclear know-how for energy purposes, a media report said.

"Though the US and its allies have been exerting political and propaganda pressure and have issued resolutions against Iran over its nuclear programme, all their efforts have failed and Iran has now become a nuclear country," Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying by Press TV.

Addressing a gathering in northern Karaj city, the Iranian president said cooperation rather than confrontation was the only way to resolve issues related to Iran's nuclear energy programme.

"We are open to cooperation based on our rights," he said, warning Western countries that Iran would give a 'regretting' response to anyone who 'intends to prevent Iran from achieving its rights'.



PHOTO : AFP
A Nepalese indigenous Gurung community member in traditional attire takes part in a New Year's celebration ceremony in Kathmandu on December 30, 2010. The ethnic group are indigenous people of Nepal's mountainous valleys and have a population of 700,000, or three percent of the Himalayan nation's population.

N Korea has boosted special forces

Says S Korea

BBC ONLINE

North Korea has increased its investment in tanks and special forces, a South Korean defence review has reported.

The paper, written every two years, notes the North has trained at least 20,000 more special forces.

It said the North remained capable of a "massive surprise bombardment" of the South's capital, Seoul.

Tensions on the Korean peninsula this year have resulted in cross-border artillery fire and calls for new talks.

The total size of the North's military remained unchanged at about 1.19 million, the paper said, but the number of special forces within that had risen to 200,000.

These are soldiers trained to carry out assassinations, and the infiltration and disruption of key facilities, the paper said.

It said the North had deployed its new battle tank, "Pokpung-ho" (or "Storm Tiger"), which reportedly made its debut in 2002.

This design is believed to be based on the Soviet Union's T-72 tanks, but most of the newly added tanks used some of the older equipment, the defence report said.

North Korea is "presumed to have secured about 40 kilograms" of weapons-grade plutonium by reprocessing spent

nuclear fuel rods four times by 2009, the paper said.

Although North Korea has previously been designated the "main enemy" of the South, this year's report calls the North simply the "enemy", apparently for diplomatic reasons.

"Not using the expression 'main enemy' does not mean that we softened our stance," Deputy Defence Minister Chang Kwang-il told reporters.

It added that the North intended to rely on its nuclear programme, special forces, cyber-warfare, submarines and long-range artillery in any conflict with the South.

However, it concluded an outright attack from the North was unlikely, given the presence of about 28,000 United States forces in South Korea.

The defence report was issued a day after the South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak said there was no choice but to try to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programme through diplomacy.

On 23 November, North Korea shelled the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong, killing four South Koreans, including civilians.

Mr Lee also told his nation earlier this week that it must unite in the face of military aggression from the North.

US revokes Venezuela ambassador's visa

BBC ONLINE

Washington has revoked the visa of the Venezuelan ambassador to the US, the US state department has said.

The move comes amid a diplomatic dispute between the two countries over President Barack Obama's choice of ambassador to Caracas, Larry Palmer.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had been angered by comments Mr Palmer made about the country this year, and withdrew his approval of Mr Palmer.

The US move in effect expels Venezuelan envoy Bernardo Alvarez Herrera.

It is not thought Mr Herrera is currently in the US, but the revocation means he cannot return.

State department spokesman Mark Toner said Caracas had only itself to blame.

"We said there would be consequences when the Venezuelan government rescinded agreement regarding our nominee, Larry Palmer."

Obama bypasses Senate in ambassador appointments

BBC ONLINE

The US President Barack Obama has bypassed the Senate to name six new appointees during the recess.

Those named included four new US ambassadors - to Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic, Syria and Turkey - as well as a deputy attorney general.

Recess appointments are made when the Senate is not in session and last until the end of Congress's next session.

Nominations for many of those selected had been blocked for months by lawmakers.

Mr Obama named Robert Ford as the new ambassador to Syria, an appointment process that he began in February.

Senators had stalled on nominating an ambassador, arguing it would reward the

country for good behaviour.

The BBC's Iain Mackenzie in Washington says the White House has long argued that re-engaging with Syria is the best way of tackling extremist groups and ensuring its involvement in the search for peace in the Middle East.

The last American ambassador was withdrawn in 2005 after Syria was implicated in the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

Another of the Obama recess appointments is James Cole, to the position of deputy attorney general to the justice department.

Republicans had expressed concerns about his links to American International Group, where he was an independent consultant until its near collapse and government bailout in 2008.

Israel ex-President found guilty of rape

BBC ONLINE

Israel's former President Moshe Katsav has been convicted of rape by a court in Tel Aviv and could go to jail.

He was found guilty of raping an employee in the 1990s when he was tourism minister and of later sexual offences while he was president.

The judges said they believed the evidence of the woman whose testimony had led to two charges of rape.

Moshe Katsav resigned from the largely ceremonial post of head of state in 2007 and was indicted in March 2009.

While his resignation caused shock across Israel, it had limited political consequences.

Rape commands a jail term in Israel of at least four years, although Katsav is thought to be likely to contest the conviction in Israel's supreme court.

State prosecutor Ronit Amiel said the verdict carried a message to other victims of abuse of power that they should not remain silent.

The former president, in office for seven years from 2000, had denied the charges, the most serious ever levelled against an Israeli head of state.

Afghan blast kills 14

BBC ONLINE

Fourteen Afghan civilians, including women and children, have died as their minibus hit a roadside bomb in southern Helmand province, Afghan officials say.

Four others were injured when the vehicle was hit by a Taliban-planted bomb, Dawood Ahmady, a spokesman for Helmand's governor, told the BBC.

It happened in a crowded area of Nahr-e Saraj district, said Nato.

The Taliban have used such bombs to kill hundreds of soldiers and police.

The BBC's Bilal Sarwary in Kabul says the device went off in an area not far from an Afghan National Army base.

LATEST LEAKS

Britain feared Israel would nuke Arabs

AFP, London

British diplomats feared Israel would use nuclear weapons in the event of another war with its Arab neighbours, secret files released yesterday showed.

In 1980, British officials were concerned that Israel could be heading for a new conflict, despite signing a peace treaty with Egypt the year before, according to official papers released from the National Archives after being kept secret for 30 years.

"The situation in the region is deteriorating and with it Israel's dangerous mood of isolation and defiance will grow," warned a cable from the British embassy in Tel Aviv, dated May 4.

"If they (Israel) are to be destroyed they will go down fighting this time. They will be ready to use their atomic weapon. Because they cannot sustain a long war, they would have to use it early."

Israel has never confirmed or denied reports that it has produced nuclear warheads.

The files also showed how prime minister Margaret Thatcher, elected to office the year before, found Middle East diplomacy exasperating.

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Top ULFA leader granted bail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi


Top ULFA leader Arabinda Rajkhowa was granted bail yesterday by a court in Assam state of India and is likely to be released from jail today, a year since he was handed over to Indian authorities by Bangladesh security agencies.

A designated Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (TADA) court here granted relief to 54-year-old Rajkhowa in six cases paving the way for his release from Guwahati Central Jail as Assam government did not object to his bail against the backdrop of its offer for peace talks with ULFA.

The hearing of the bail petition was earlier deferred thrice this month with the court on Monday asking the home and political department to submit an affidavit on his latest status.

After walking free, he will go to his hometown in Lakhua in upper Assam for the first time in 30 years since he went underground after the formation of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) on April 7, 1979.

Rajkhowa is the sixth top jailed leader of ULFA to have been released on bail this year.



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E-mail: info@campebd.org Website: www.campebd.org

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