

# Iran 'may boost nuclear programme'

*Says report; US, UK warn Israel over pre-emptive strike*

AGENCIES

Iran may be poised to expand its nuclear programme at an underground site near the city of Qom, a Vienna-based diplomat told the BBC yesterday.

It appears to be ready to install thousands of new-generation centrifuges at the fortified underground plant, the diplomat said.

They could speed up the production of enriched uranium - required for both power generation and nuclear weapons.

This is another warning that Iran may be stepping up its controversial nuclear work, despite increasing international sanctions, says the BBC's Bethany Bell in Vienna.

Three days ago, Iran itself said it had advanced its nuclear know-how, including developing centrifuges able to enrich uranium faster.

The United Nations nuclear watchdog, the IAEA, has not commented.

Its inspectors are due to visit Tehran

this week for another round of talks on Iran's nuclear activities, after they were denied access to certain nuclear sites and scientists on a visit last month.

Tensions between Iran and Israel also have been simmering with Iranian warships entering the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal in a show of "might", a move Israel said it would closely monitor.

On Saturday, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague warned Iran's nuclear ambitions could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region - where at present the only country believed to possess such weapons is Israel.

Instead, there is increasingly feverish media speculation that Israel is planning a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

On Saturday, Israel's military chief of staff, Lt Gen Benny Gantz told a state TV station the country would ultimately make any decision to strike on

its own, reported AFP news agency, saying it was "the central guarantor of its own security".

Meanwhile, US national security adviser Tom Donilon has arrived in Israel for talks with officials on a range of issues including Iran. An Israeli official said he would meet Netanyahu yesterday afternoon.

Israeli media yesterday quoted a CNN interview with the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, in which he warns that an Israeli military strike on Iran would be "destabilising."

"It's not prudent at this point to decide to attack Iran," the Jerusalem Post quoted him as saying in a transcript of the interview to be broadcasted later.

And William Hague yesterday said that Israel would not be "wise" to attack Iran over its disputed nuclear programme, saying it should give the diplomatic route a chance to succeed.



PHOTO: AFP

**Senegalese demonstrators gather behind a burning barricade yesterday after clashes erupted outside a mosque. The protesters are demanding 85-year-old President Abdoulaye Wade leave office as fury mounts over his candidacy for a third term in power in February polls.**

## Iran halts oil sales to France, Britain

AFP, Tehran

Iran has halted its limited oil sales to France and Britain in retaliation for a phased EU ban on Iranian oil that is yet to take full effect, the oil ministry said yesterday.

"Oil sales to British and French companies have ceased," spokesman Ali Reza Nikzad Rahbar said in a statement on the ministry's official website.

"We have taken steps to deliver our oil to other countries in the place of British and French companies," he said.

The decision was not expected to have a big impact. France last year bought only three percent of its oil -- 58,000 barrels a day -- from the Islamic republic, and Britain was believed to be no longer importing Iranian oil.

But it was seen as a warning shot to other EU nations that are bigger consumers of Iranian oil, including Italy, Spain and Greece.

Although those countries were not affected by Iran's announcement, they are included in an EU decision to stop buying Iranian oil that was announced last month and which will take full effect from July.

According to the International Energy Agency, Italy sourced 13 percent of its oil, or 185,000 barrels per day, from Iran, while Spain imported 12 percent of its oil needs, or 161,000 bpd, and Greece bought 30 percent of its needs, or 103,000 bpd.

Iran, OPEC's second-biggest exporter after Saudi Arabia, pumps 3.5 million bpd of which it exports 2.5 million barrels.

## Blast kills 15 at Iraq police academy

AFP, Baghdad

A suicide car bomber blew himself up in front of a Baghdad police academy yesterday, killing 15 people and wounding 21 others in the deadliest attack for weeks in the Iraqi capital, security officials said.

At least seven other people were killed in attacks elsewhere in Iraq.

The suicide bomber "blew himself up at the entrance of the police academy on Palestine Street," an interior ministry official said, putting the toll at 15 killed and 21 wounded. A police colonel confirmed the toll.

The ministry official later told AFP that the assailant was at the wheel of a car bomb and most of his victims were students applying to join the police force.

## SOUTH KOREA BORDER DRILL N Korea warns of retaliation

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's military yesterday warned it would bombard islands near the disputed Yellow Sea border with South Korea in retaliation of Seoul's planned regular naval live-fire drill in the area.

South Korean troops stationed in the tense five border islands will stage a monthly live-fire exercise in the area Monday, a Marine corps spokesman told AFP.

Pyongyang has taken a hostile tone towards Seoul since Kim Jong-Un, the youngest son of the late leader Kim Jong-Il, took over following the death of his father in December.

The North's Western Sector Command warned residents of the five islands to "evacuate to safe areas" before what it said was the scheduled start time of the exercise on Monday morning.

In a notice carried by Pyongyang's official news agency, the North's military said Seoul "should not forget the lesson" of the North's bombardment of Yeonpyeong island in November 2010, which killed four South Koreans.

The South's Marine corps spokesman said the planned live-fire drill-- which involves all artillery deployed in the area including K-9 self-propelled guns-- is only part of its regular exercise.

"There is nothing special or new in the drill for this month compared to past ones. This is something we've been doing every month," he told AFP.

## Philippine's bachelor leader hopes to find a wife

AFP, Manila

The Philippines' middle-aged bachelor president Benigno Aquino said yesterday he was still hoping to find a wife, saying it would make him a better leader.

Aquino, who turned 52 this month and recently confirmed he was dating a South Korean woman, said he had been looking for a wife for years but he had never found anyone.

"I have been planning this for a long time, since college even. But I just have been unlucky," he told reporters.

"Given the burdens of this office, if there was someone you could confide in, someone you could talk to, someone who would tell you, 'you are still doing okay', then of course, that would be a key to your inspiration," he said.

In recent years, the balding, bespectacled president, a member of one of the country's richest families, has been linked to several much younger women.

Earlier this month, he confirmed he was seeing a South Korean media personality, Grace Lee, 29.

Lee, who moved to the Philippines as a child, co-hosts a popular music radio programme in Manila as well as several television shows.

Aquino said last year that he was resigned to the idea of staying single until his term as president ended in mid-2016 because the demands of his job were too great.

## Santorum questions Obama's faith

REUTERS, Ohio

Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum challenged President Barack Obama's Christian beliefs on Saturday, saying White House policies were motivated by a "different theology."

A devout Roman Catholic who has risen to the top of Republican polls in recent days, Santorum said the Obama administration had failed to prevent gas prices rising and was using "political science" in the debate about climate change.

Obama's agenda is "not about you. It's not about your



quality of life. It's not about your jobs. It's about some phony ideal. Some phony theology. Oh, not a theology based on the Bible. A different theology," Santorum told supporters of the conservative Tea Party movement at a Columbus hotel.

When asked about the statement at a news conference later, Santorum said, "If the president says he's a Christian, he's a Christian."

But Santorum did not back down from the assertion that Obama's values run against those of Christianity.

"He is imposing his values on the Christian church. He can categorise those values anyway he wants. I'm not going to," Santorum told reporters.

A social conservative, Santorum is increasingly seen as a champion for evangelical Christians in fights with Democrats over contraception and gay marriage.

The campaign's response signaled a new respect for Santorum. Until this week, the Obama campaign appeared exclusively focused on Mitt Romney. Republicans are waging a state-by-state contest to pick a candidate to challenge Obama in November's election.

At a campaign appearance in Florida last month, Santorum declined to correct a voter who called Obama, a Christian, an "avowed Muslim."

Santorum told CNN after that incident, "I don't feel it's my obligation every time someone says something I don't agree with to contradict them, and the president's a big boy, he can defend himself."

## NEWS IN brief

### Egypt presidential polls delayed

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's first presidential elections since a popular uprising ousted veteran leader Hosni Mubarak a year ago will be held in the first week of June, officials were quoted as saying yesterday.

Egyptian authorities are due to officially announce the timetable for the presidential election.

"The election will start in the first days of June and will end in the last week of June if there is a run-off," Ahmed Shams El-Din, a member of the presidential election committee told the independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm.

Presidential hopefuls will have three weeks starting March 10 to register their candidacy, after which there will be campaigning for 45 days.

Last month, a panel charged with advising the military council had proposed to hold the landmark elections on May 16, a month earlier than the June deadline set by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

Attempts at bringing forward the date come amid a series of nationwide rallies demanding the ouster of the SCAF. Activists accuse the junta of mismanagement of the transition, of human rights violations and

## Gillard in leadership challenge

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday insisted she was the right person to lead the country, dismissing as "gossip" talk of a possible leadership challenge from within her party after months of poor polls.

There have been repeated media reports Gillard may be challenged by the man she ousted as prime minister in an internal party coup in 2010, Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd.

Rudd has denied such plans but Gillard backers this weekend closed ranks around the prime minister, publicly saying she was a better prime minister. At the same time an embarrassing video showing Rudd losing his temper and swearing while prime minister



Julia Gillard

was posted anonymously on YouTube.

The speculation follows months of poor polls predicting a convincing victory for the conservative opposition in an election due by late 2013. One government member of parliament has publicly called on Gillard to

step down amid reports of a potential backbench revolt.

Asked if Rudd could win a possible challenge, she said: "I'm not going to engage in hypotheticals. Not the Canberra based gossip but actually delivering things that have got a real chance of making a difference in the lives of families around the nation."

Rudd is considered popular with voters and has outpolled Gillard as preferred leader of the Labor party in recent polls.

## Mamata trouble for Congress, again

THE HINDU ONLINE

For the Congress, a fresh salvo from ally Trinamool Congress, objecting to the setting up of a National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), along with other fellow Chief Ministers, could not have come at a worse moment: the party is not just in the midst of a tough election in Uttar Pradesh, there was also disappointing news coming in from Maharashtra on the Corporation polls.

The party is now waiting with bated breath for the results of the UP elections to come in. It is only then that the Congress will know whether it can secure a more permanent support at the Centre from either the Samajwadi Party (SP) or even the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) as insurance against the possibility of the Trinamool withdrawing support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Till then, it will have to treat Banerjee with kid gloves.

On Friday, while Congress spokesperson Renuka Chowdhury stressed the fact that the nation was facing a "hard time," and that "there could be no compromise" on terror, she was extremely diplomatic when pressed to respond to questions about Banerjee's opposition to the NCTC.

Asked whether Banerjee was working on consolidating a Third Alternative to challenge



the UPA by making common cause with other Chief Ministers opposing the NCTC, Chowdhury said, "I don't want to read more into it. It is a part of the democratic process. If a Chief Minister wants to speak to other Chief Ministers and try and form a pressure group...it is part of that process. We are not unduly disturbed." Pressed, she simply said, "We appreciate her compulsions."

Indeed, it was in the winter session of Parliament that Banerjee's Trinamool voted for the government-sponsored Lokpal Bill in the Lok Sabha, and then torpedoed it in the Rajya Sabha by moving several amendments, along with the other opposition parties, much to the embarrassment of the Congress.

With the UPA reeling under crisis after crisis, solidarity among the coalition's members would have helped the Congress take on the Opposition more vigorously. But in the few months since she became Chief Minister of West Bengal, Banerjee made it more than evident that the interests of her own party will take precedence over any coalition issue.

It has become evident that when it comes to providing support on crucial issues, such as the Teesta Waters Accord with Bangladesh, or important policy matters or key pieces of legislation or policy matters like the NCTC, the Congress simply cannot count on Banerjee.

## Manarat, HURDCO

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fourth round when tricky words like "apothegm" and "cachinnate" came up.

The fifth knockout round was a tiebreaker in which Ayesha Hayder Chowdhury of class seven came out as the third top speller from the school.

An ecstatic Ayesha said she was looking to build on experience and learn from her mistakes.

The contest at Manarat International School saw Raiyan Ishrak Ahsan, Rafi Reza and Mahzabin Amin of class eight as the school's top three spellers who will be competing in the second phase.

Raiyan, Rafi and Mahzabin had to spell "concurrent," "cynicism" and "blasphemy" to be one among the top spellers.

"I practise spelling every day for about an hour and would like to be among the top six spellers," said a very determined Rafi.

The spelling contest was also held at Play Pen School where Shah Asef Aktab of class nine and Sayba Zafrin Chowdhury and Rakei Matul Haque of class seven made it through to the second phase.

Interested students and those who have not qualified in their schools' rounds still have scope to contest in the second phase. They can log on to [www.champs21.com](http://www.champs21.com) and play online spelling games as many times as they want as only their top scores will be registered. The top scorers from the online games will also participate in the next round, which will have at least 500 participants from Dhaka division.

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