

Iran warns of pre-emptive strikes

Announces military drill, extends oil embargo

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran would take pre-emptive action against its enemies if it felt its national interests were endangered, the deputy head of the Islamic Republic's armed forces was quoted by a semi-official news agency as saying yesterday.

"Our strategy now is that if we feel our enemies want to endanger Iran's national interests, and want to decide to do that, we will act without waiting for their actions," Mohammad Hejazi told Fars news agency.

Israel and the United States do not rule out military action against Iran if sanctions and diplomacy fail to rein in its nuclear energy campaign.

On Monday, Iran announced it will hold military exercises to boost protection of its nuclear sites.

A military statement said drills would be held in southern Iran to counter "all possible threats, especially to public, important and nuclear centres".

The report came amid feverish speculations that Israel may launch a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

The latest move comes as UN nuclear

experts begin a two-day visit to Iran, the second such trip in a month.

"The exercises aim to reinforce the integrated abilities of the country's anti-air defences," said a statement from the Katemol-Anbia military air base, quoted by the official Irna news agency.

The exercises were scheduled to start on late Monday.

Late last year Iran conducted 10 days of military exercises near the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Gulf, test-firing several missiles.

On Sunday, Iran's oil ministry announced a retaliatory halt in oil sales to French and British companies, though that step will be largely symbolic as those firms had already greatly reduced purchases of Iranian crude.

Tehran said it is considering extending the oil embargo to other European countries, a semi-official Iranian news agency reported on Monday.

The head of Iran's state oil company Ahmad Qalehbani was quoted by Mehr as saying that the country would stop selling crude to nations who take action against Tehran.



Revellers of the Academicos do Grande Rio samba school perform during the second night of Carnival at the Sambadrome in Rio de Janeiro yesterday. The processions, featuring scantily clad dancing queens, spectacularly imaginative floats and thousands of extras, were being held before a stadium crowd of 70,000 and an international broadcast audience.

PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar to consider poll observers

REUTERS, Bangkok

Myanmar will "seriously consider" allowing Southeast Asian observers to attend April parliamentary by-elections, President Thein Sein said, the latest sign of openness by a civilian government keen to end decades of isolation.

The president made the comment to the visiting secretary-general of the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean), Surin Pitsuwan, on Monday.

If observers are allowed, it would be a first for Myanmar, which held elections in November 2010 that were fraught with allegations of vote-rigging.

Although only 48 seats are up for grabs in the by-elections, they are seen as a litmus test of the new government's democratic credentials after a series of reforms that would have been inconceivable under the military dictatorship that ceded power last March.

MUSHARRAF'S ARREST Pakistan to seek Interpol's help

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan is in the final stages of asking Interpol to help arrest former military ruler Pervez Musharraf over the murder of ex-premier Benazir Bhutto, Interior Minister Rehman Malik said yesterday.

"We will bring Musharraf back to the country soon with a red notice issued through Interpol," Malik told lawmakers in the provincial assembly of Bhutto's home province of Sindh.

"We are in the final phase of doing this," he said without elaborating.

Bhutto was assassinated on December 27, 2007, while leaving an election rally in Rawalpindi, the headquarters of Pakistan's army.

Musharraf, who has lived in self-imposed exile in London and Dubai since August 2008, last month indefinitely delayed plans to return home to contest elections after the government warned he would be arrested upon arrival.

Pakistani courts have issued warrants for his arrest over the 2006 death of Akbar Bugti, a Baluch rebel leader in the southwest, and the 2007 assassination of Bhutto, whose widower is Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari.



Pervez Musharraf

Nepal jails minister in graft case

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's highest court yesterday jailed a serving government minister for corruption in a first for a nation fighting an ingrained culture of graft.

The Supreme Court handed information and communications minister, Jaya Prakash Prasad Gupta, an 18-month sentence and an 8.4 million-rupee fine after he failed to account for a vast portfolio of property accrued while in office.

Gupta, 52, has held a number of ministerial posts and was appointed to the information ministry after his party struck a deal with the Maoists to form a coalition government in August last year.

Chiranjibi Wagle, a former government minister, was jailed for corruption last year in Nepal but Gupta is the first serving cabinet secretary to be handed prison time in a graft case.

NUKE RISK REDUCTION PACT India, Pak agree to extend treaty

PTI, Islamabad

India and Pakistan yesterday announced that they had agreed to extend a pact on reducing the risk from accidents related to nuclear weapons for another five years.

The two sides agreed to extend the validity of the 'Agreement on Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons' for five years with effect from today in line with an understanding reached during the sixth round of bilateral expert-level talks on nuclear confidence building measures held in Islamabad on December 27, 2011.

The agreement had entered into force on February 21, 2007 for an initial duration of five years, said a statement from Pakistan's Foreign Office.

"It aims at reducing the risk from accidents related to nuclear weapons," it said.

During the talks held in December, India and Pakistan decided to move forward on proposals to extend two key agreements related to pre-notification of ballistic missile tests and reducing the risk from accidents related to nuclear weapons.

The two sides reviewed a range of existing nuclear and conventional CBMs and discussed proposals for additional measures in areas where the two countries could make forward movement.

The talks on nuclear and conventional CBMs were part of the peace process that resumed last year after a gap of over two years in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which were blamed on the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The artist who hears colour

DAILYMAIL ONLINE

A colour-blind artist has become the world's first government-recognised cyborg with a head-mounted device that translates colour to sound.

Neil Harbisson, 29, has conquered achromatopsia, a condition that only allows him to see in black and white, with a gadget that interprets colours as different notes on a scale.

He wears the device, dubbed an eyeborg, wherever he goes and in 2004 he secured official recognition from the UK Identity and Passport Service that it was part of his body.

The eyeborg works via a head-mounted camera connected to a computer that picks up the colours directly in front of Harbisson and converts them into sound waves.

For the device to work, Harbisson first had to memorise the frequencies that related to each colour: high frequency hues are high-pitched, while low frequency hues

sound bolder. Red is the lowest frequency, with a note that is in between F and F sharp, and violet is the highest frequency, with a note hovering around C.

Born in Britain but raised in Catalonia, Harbisson began studying fine art at the age of 16, after already training in music, dance and drama.

However, it wasn't until Harbisson moved to England in 2002 to study Music Composition at Dartington College of Arts that he was able to make use of the concept. During his second year at the college he attended a lecture on cybernetics, particularly on sensory extensions, given by Adam Montandon.

At the end of the lecture Harbisson approached Montandon to explain his disability, who agreed to make him a cybernetic extension to overcome it.

Harbisson says the eyeborg has completely changed the way that he perceives art, giving him a world in which colour and sound are the same thing.



Neil Harbisson

Protest over Quran burning in Afghanistan

AGENCIES

More than 2,000 Afghans protested outside the main US military base in Afghanistan yesterday over a report that foreign troops had improperly disposed of copies of the Quran and other religious items, Afghan officials said.

The US commander of Nato troops in Afghanistan apologised over the alleged incidents.

In a statement, General John R Allen ordered a full investigation.

Afghan officials told the AP news agency that the Qurans were in rubbish that two soldiers with the US-led coalition transported in a lorry late on Monday night to a pit on the base where rubbish is burned.

When five Afghans working at the pit noticed the religious books in the rubbish, they stopped the disposal process.

A photographer for the AFP news agency said that guards at the base fired rubber bullets from a watchtower as the crowd shouted "Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar".

"We are thoroughly investigating the incident and we are taking steps to ensure this does not ever happen again. I assure you... I promise you... this was not intentional in anyway," General Allen said.

Correspondents say that it was a remarkably candid statement by the general - played repeatedly on Afghan television - apparently aimed at damage control after similar incidents led to violence and attacks on foreigners.

Protests raged for three days across Afghanistan killing 20 people in April last year after a US pastor burned a Quran in Florida.



US soldiers (background) look on while standing along the perimeter gate of Bagram airbase yesterday during a protest against Koran desecration at Bagram, about 60 kilometers north of Kabul.

PHOTO: AFP

SEX RING PROBE

Strauss-Kahn detained again

AFP, Lille

French police yesterday detained former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn for questioning over allegations he took part in orgies in Paris and Washington with prostitutes paid for by businessmen.

The 62-year-old former Socialist minister, who until last year was seen as the frontrunner to replace Nicolas Sarkozy as president of France, had been summoned as a witness but prosecutors said he was now a suspect.

He turned up voluntarily at a police station in the northern city of Lille for his appointment for questioning about his role in the latest sex scandal to beset his ruined career.

After his arrival, prosecutors said he would be detained on suspicion of "abetting aggravated pimping by an organised gang" and "misuse of company funds" and could thus face charges.



Under French law, aggravated organised pimping carries a prison term of up to 20 years and profiting from embezzlement five years and a large fine.

Between interrogations, the millionaire was to be held in a spartan 7.5-square-metre (80-square-foot) cell with a simple foam mattress, a sink and a hole-in-the-floor squat toilet.

Investigating magistrates want to know whether he was aware that the women who entertained him at parties in restaurants, hotels and swingers

clubs in Paris, Washington and several European capitals were paid prostitutes.

Paying a prostitute is not in itself illegal in France, but profiting from vice or embezzling company funds to pay for sex can lead to charges.

The former director of the International Monetary Fund admits he has led an adventurous sex life, but denies that he was implicated in pimping or corruption and has indicated he will deny any criminal wrongdoing.

The last of the sex parties is said to have taken place during a trip to Washington and the IMF headquarters between May 11 and 13 last year by Paszkowski and Roquet, in part to discuss Strauss-Kahn's presidential bid.

One day later, on May 14, Strauss-Kahn's career fell apart when he was arrested in New York following allegations that he had subjected chambermaid Nafissatou Diallo to a brutal sexual assault in his hotel suite.

Rahul Gandhi accused of poll violation

BBC ONLINE

Congress party MP Rahul Gandhi has been accused of violating election rules while campaigning for the crucial assembly polls in India's Uttar Pradesh state.

A case has been registered against him alleging that his road show in Kanpur city breached the time limit and the route map set by the authorities.

"The district administration had allocated time till noon and fixed a 20km route for Rahul Gandhi's road show but he violated it and stretched it beyond the permitted time," Press Trust of India quoted district magistrate Hari Om as saying.

"He also did not stick to the prescribed route for the event... There could have been a security breach or a clash," he said.

The Congress party denies the charges.

Rahul is an MP from Uttar Pradesh and although he is not contesting the assembly elections, which begin today. He has been campaigning extensively in the politically crucial state, which sends the most members to parliament.

The state was once a Congress stronghold, but the party has lost ground over the years to regional parties.

Authorities said Rahul had sought permission to cover 38 km, but he was allowed a shorter route because of the Hindu religious festival of Shivratri on Monday.

The ongoing elections in the state are being seen as a dress rehearsal for the 2014 parliamentary elections in India.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt to provide power to Gaza

AFP, Cairo

Egypt is to provide 22 megawatts of electricity to the Israeli-blockaded Gaza Strip, where the sole power plant has shut down after running out of fuel, the electricity minister said yesterday.

Egypt "will begin boosting the Gaza Strip with around 22 megawatts of electricity at the start of next week, to confront the crisis there and ease the suffering of the Palestinian people," Hassan Yunes said.

He said the move was part of a larger plan that would see the impoverished strip connected to a regional grid.

The power plant, which supplies around a third of Gaza's electricity, suffers frequent outages, leading to daily blackouts across the Hamas-run territory.

Saudi to send ambassador to Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq will approve the nomination of a non-resident Saudi ambassador, the Iraqi foreign minister said yesterday, terming it a positive sign for the normalisation of ties between the two countries.

Saudi Arabia has not had an ambassador to Iraq since 1990, the year now-executed dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

"We will accept and we certainly welcome" the presentation of "the Saudi ambassador in Amman's credentials as non-resident ambassador" to Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari told AFP.

It is "a very positive sign ... for the normalisation of relations" between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, he said.

Above 3,000 to contest Iran polls

AFP, Tehran

A total of 3,444 vetted candidates are to run in elections next month to fill the 290 seats in Iran's parliament, officials said yesterday.

Another 1,200 people were rejected from the list "for various reasons, and others withdrew," said a spokesman for the Guardians Council tasked with overseeing elections in the Islamic republic, according to several media.

The March 2 vote will be the first nationwide poll in Iran since the disputed 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose victory opponents said was claimed fraudulently, sparking unprecedented protests.