

West seeking regime change in Iran: Putin

AFP, Moscow

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin yesterday accused the West of seeking "regime change" in Iran and warned Washington that Russia intended to keep its nuclear weapons to keep US power in check.

"Under the guise of trying to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction... they are attempting something else entirely and setting different goals -- regime change," news agencies quoted Putin as saying.

"We have such suspicions," said Putin. "And we are trying to take a stand that differs from the one they are trying to force on us... concerning the ways that the Iranian nuclear problem might develop."

Russia has longstanding commercial and military ties with Iran and has condemned unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union over its suspected pursuit of nuclear weapons.



Meanwhile, The UN atomic agency yesterday said it has "major differences" with Iran and "major concerns" about its nuclear programme, after inspectors probing suspected weapons work returned from Tehran empty-handed.

It added that Iran has tripled production of 20-percent enriched uranium since its last assessment in November, with 696 centrifuges installed at its heavily bunkered Fordo site -- all of them older-generation, however.

Uranium further enriched to 90-percent purity could in theory be used in a nuclear bomb, although Iran denies intending to do so, saying its activities are peaceful.

Putin's tough talk came as he toured a nuclear research centre in the once-secret city of Sarov ahead of a March 4 presidential election in which he is widely expected to secure a return to the Kremlin.

"I think that our position at the UN Security Council on Syria shows that we do not intend to be anyone's yes-men. And I hope that this is how things will continue," said Putin.

Putin spent much of his meeting in Sarov laying out a future Russian nuclear defence strategy that kept the United States from establishing a global monopoly on power.

"This is not only our national objective, but also an obligation before all humanity -- to keep a balance of strategic forces and their capabilities," Putin said.

UN condemns Israel diplomat attacks

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Thursday condemned a "terrorist attack" against an Israeli diplomat in India, without making any mention of accusations against Iran.

The 15-nation council said in a statement that it "condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attack in New Delhi" on February 13 in which an Israeli diplomat was badly injured.

The council also condemned an attempted attack in Georgia which followed.

The UN Council did not say who was behind the attacks. But Israel has accused Iran of masterminding both attacks as well as a plot in Bangkok in which an Iranian lost both legs when a bomb he was carrying exploded.

Tehran has strongly denied any involvement in the incidents.

'I've got another 5 yrs' Obama makes bold reelection prediction

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama made no bones about his chances of reelection in an interview with America's largest Hispanic radio service, saying: "I've got another five years coming up."

Quizzed by Univision's Eddie "Piolin" Sotelo about his failure to enact comprehensive immigration reform, Obama replied: "Well, first of all, Piolin, my presidency is not over."

"I've got another five years coming up. We're going to get this done," he continued, according to a transcript of the interview, which was conducted on Tuesday and broadcast on Univision Radio on Wednesday.

The remarks, coming as Republican hopefuls become increasingly drawn into a long and bitter nomination battle, and as the US economy shows signs of sputtering back into life, marked a big turnaround from October when Obama said he would "absolutely" be the underdog in the November 2012 election.

With Hispanic voters making up vital



constituencies in battleground states such as Arizona, Colorado and Florida, Obama has insisted that it is Republicans in Congress who are preventing him from a major push behind a comprehensive immigration policy overhaul.

Obama's reelection campaign has previously blasted his most likely Republican

opponent, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, over his tough talk against the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country.

Romney has sided with party hardliners to advocate a plan that would see undocumented immigrants removed from US soil even if it means breaking up families.

Obama's approval rating hit the crucial 50 percent level in two new surveys last week.

Among his possible Republican challengers in November, Romney and former senator Rick Santorum come closest to beating him in the latest opinion polls, but still trail the president by an average six to seven percentage points.

NEWS IN brief

Manning declines to enter plea

AFP, Fort Meade

WikiLeaks suspect Bradley Manning declined to enter a plea at his arraignment Thursday on charges of turning over a massive cache of classified US documents to the secret-spilling site.

Manning, a 24-year-old US Army private, is charged with 22 counts in connection with one of the biggest intelligence breaches in US history.

The most serious charge -- "aiding the enemy" -- could send him to prison for life.

Manning deferred entering a plea, which he is not required to do until the start of the court-martial.

Manning is accused of passing hundreds of thousands of military field reports from Iraq and Afghanistan and US diplomatic cables to WikiLeaks between November 2009 and May 2010, when he served as an intelligence analyst in Iraq.

Chavez travels to Cuba for surgery

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's Hugo Chavez travels to Cuba yesterday for treatment of what he says is likely a malignant tumor as the leftist president faces a renewed cancer scare ahead of a tough reelection battle.

The firebrand leftist leader, who is seeking reelection in October, announced his plans to travel to Cuba during a cabinet meeting Thursday, saying that the operation could take place Monday or Tuesday.

He went on to warn supporters to be wary of rumors

Obama keeps sanctions on Libya

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Thursday extended by one year the national emergency order allowing sanctions against Libya to remain in place, the White House announced.

In a letter to congressional leaders, Obama said he was concerned by ongoing threats posed to US interests by the family of late Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi and members of his deposed regime.

On December 16, the United States and the United Nations Security Council lifted most of the sanctions imposed on Libya under Gaddafi's rule. According to the US Treasury, more than \$30 billion of Libyan



Turkish journalists in Ankara hold pictures of French photojournalist Remi Ochlik, centre, and Sunday Times correspondent Marie Colvin, right, who were killed in an alleged rocket attack by Syrian regime forces during a demonstration yesterday. They denounced violence against members of the media and the brutality of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

PHOTO: AFP

Mild drought killed off Mayan civilisation

AFP, Washington

The collapse of the Mayan civilization was likely due to a relatively mild drought, much like the drier conditions expected in the coming years due to climate change, scientists said Thursday.

Scholars have long believed that a major drought caused severe dry conditions that killed off the ancient culture known for its mastery of language, math and astronomy.

But researchers from the Yucatan Center for Scientific Research in Mexico and the University of Southampton in Britain said their analysis shows the drought only caused reductions of 25 to 40 percent less annual rain.

The smaller amounts of rain meant that open water sources in pools and lakes evaporated faster than could be replaced by more precipitation, said the



study in the journal Science.

"The data suggest that the main cause was a decrease in summer storm activity," said co-author Eelco Rohling of the University of Southampton.

The study is the first of its kind to attempt to assess exactly how much rainfall decreased between 800 and 950 AD when Mayan civilisation went into decline, and bases its modeling data on records of past rainfall changes from

stalagmites and shallow lakes.

The analysis showed that modest dry spells could have sparked major water shortages in an area with no rivers, and no source of water other than rain.

"Societal disruptions and abandonment of cities are likely consequences of critical water shortages, especially because there seems to have been a rapid repetition of multi-year droughts," said Rohling.

International experts have predicted that similar dry spells in the Yucatan region are on the way due to climate change.

While modern societies are expected to be better equipped to handle drought, risks remain, said lead author Martin Medina-Elizalde of the Yucatan Center for Scientific Research in Mexico.

LEADERSHIP ROW IN AUSTRALIA

Rudd challenges Gillard in party vote

AFP, Sydney

Former prime minister Kevin Rudd yesterday confirmed he will challenge his successor Julia Gillard to lead Australia's ruling party, saying she had lost voters' trust and would crash at the next election.

Rudd, who quit as foreign minister while in Washington this week, arrived back in Australia a day after Prime Minister Gillard called a ballot for Monday to decide who should lead Labor as a divisive rift between them came to a head.

"If we are honest to ourselves, all the indications are we are heading to the rocks at the next elections," Rudd said, with polls due in 2013.

"Rightly or wrongly, Julia has lost the trust of the Australian people, and starting on Monday I will start restoring that trust."

"That is why I have decided to contest the leadership of the Australian Labor Party," he said, adding that if he lost on Monday he would retire to the backbenches and not take on Gillard again.

But while he remains popular with voters, Rudd, considered egotistical and headstrong by some colleagues, seems likely to lose the vote, according to media tallies of the 103-member Labor caucus.

US, N Korea talks end with little progress

AFP, Beijing

A US diplomat yesterday said some progress had been made in the first talks between the United States and North Korea since the death of Kim Jong-Il, but there were no breakthroughs.

Glyn Davies, coordinator for US policy on North Korea, said he had a "better understanding" of North Korea's position on the country's controversial nuclear programme, but they had not achieved any "dramatic results" during the talks.

"The talks were serious and substantive ... I think we made a little bit of progress," Davies told reporters at the end of the two-day meeting in Beijing. "We have been able to illuminate the issues a bit better, gain a better understanding of their point of view, their rationale and their position."

The talks were seen as a chance for Washington to clarify what policies North Korea's untested new leader Kim Jong-Un plans, and to try to work with Pyongyang to resume six-nation talks on ending its nuclear weapons programme.

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