

Obama warns against premature Iran strike

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama warned on Friday against a premature attack on Iran, while Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu insisted his country had the right to self-defence and needed room to manoeuvre.

But in an apparent nod to Netanyahu ahead of key White House talks on Monday, Obama said if sanctions failed to curb Tehran's atomic ambitions, US military action against Iranian nuclear facilities should not be ruled out.

"I think that the Israeli government recognizes that, as president of the United States, I don't bluff," Obama told the Atlantic Monthly magazine in remarks published Friday.

"I also don't, as a matter of sound policy, go around advertising exactly what our intentions are. But I think both the Iranian and the Israeli governments recognize that when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say."

Obama warned, however, that a premature military strike could inadvertently help the Iranian regime.

"At a time when there is not a lot of sympathy for Iran and its only real ally (Syria) is on the ropes, do we want a distraction in which suddenly Iran can portray itself as a victim?" Obama said.



of Israel's role, "it would still be a profound national-security interest of the United States to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon," the president argued.

US strategy included isolating Tehran politically, sanctions and diplomacy, Obama said.

On his way to Washington, Netanyahu arrived Friday in Canada against a backdrop of fears that Israel could unilaterally strike suspected Iranian nuclear sites.

Speaking alongside Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper during a visit to parliament in Ottawa, Netanyahu had tough words but was careful not to appear to be pressuring his US ally.

"I have not set red lines and we are not seeking to set red lines to the United States," he said in Hebrew.

Netanyahu says all options remain on the table concerning action on Iran, whose President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has repeatedly questioned Israel's right to exist.

Russia goes to polls today

Putin expected to win

AFP, Moscow

Russia prepared yesterday to return strongman Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin for a record third term that begins under a tide of protests unseen since the Soviet era and mounting tensions with the West.

The 59-year-old ex-KGB spy's victory in today's presidential ballot at this stage seems beyond doubt.

State forecasts show him storming to a first-round victory with 60 percent of the vote and his Communist rival Gennady Zyuganov -- a dour but seasoned lawmaker who is running for the fourth time -- taking second with 15 percent.

The tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov and the flamboyant but ultimately pro-Kremlin populist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy are expected to battle for third place while the former upper house speaker Sergei Mironov is looking to finish last.

But Putin's landslide victory may only mask an era of political uncertainty that has descended on Russia and contrasts sharply with the current prime minister's commanding first two terms as president between 2000 and 2008.

The emotional street protests that erupted in response to a fraudulent December parliamentary ballot have since swelled into a broader opposition movement whose reliance on social media echoes the Arab Spring revolts.

The largest demonstrations have thus far been confined to Russia's main cities and the authorities point to polls showing the anti-Putin cause backed by only a marginal fraction of the nation.

Putin's entire election campaign has been driven by an undercurrent of anti-Western rhetoric.

The campaign also saw Putin's almost imperial refusal to debate his opponents -- a feature of past elections that aims to paint him as a man of action who is too busy to engage in polemics with rivals.

The four rank outsiders have all admitted to only having the ambition of finishing second and possibly joining a runoff should Putin fail to pick up 50 percent of the vote.

Key figures in Russia's political opposition

The far left  Writer and leader of barred <i>The Other Russia</i> party, which succeeded his banned <i>National Bolshevik Party</i>		 Leader of the <i>Left Front</i> movement. Backs Communist presidential candidate <i>Gennady Zyuganov</i>	
Anti-Kremlin liberals  Former deputy prime minister under Boris Yeltsin		 Former chess champion, fervent Putin critic	
Grassroots rights movements  Anti-corruption blogger and ex-lawyer, with ties to ultra-nationalists. A figurehead of the protest movement		 Veteran dissident. Co-founder of the <i>Moscow Helsinki Group</i> , one of Russia's oldest human rights groups	
 Leading detective novelist. Regularly addresses opposition rallies			

The marathon election stretches over nine time zones and begins with the opening of polls in the Far East at 2000 GMT Saturday.

It culminates with their close in the western exclave of Kaliningrad 21 hours later at 1700 GMT on Sunday.

700 killed in Homs blitz: HRW

AFP, Beirut

Syrian forces killed some 700 people and wounded thousands in a 27-day bombardment of Homs, with shells sometimes falling at the rate of 100 an hour, Human Rights Watch said.

HRW urged the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution demanding an end to "end indiscriminate shelling of cities and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid and the safe passage of civilians and the injured."

According to accounts from journalists and residents who fled, the New York-based watchdog said late on Friday that heavy shelling of the city's Baba Amr district would start every day at around 6:30am and continue until sunset, with some during the night.



PHOTO: AFP

Utility workers try to restore electricity to a tornado-damaged section of town on Friday in Harrisburg, Illinois, USA.

Deadly tornados kill 27 in US

AFP, Chicago

Rescue workers yesterday searched for survivors after scores of tornadoes tore across the central United States, killing at least 27 people and wiping out whole communities.

Trucks and trees were tossed aside like playthings Friday as deadly funnel clouds descended on five states.

The images were surreal: a school bus smashed through the wall of a house, trucks thrown into lakes, solid brick homes reduced to rubble and wooden ones smashed into kindling, mobile homes flipped like tin cans.

The death toll in Indiana reached 13 late Friday, officials said. Meanwhile, the Kentucky Department of Public Health has confirmed a total of 12 fatalities.

A total of 13 tornadoes passed through that state on Friday, according to the Kentucky Emergency Management agency.

Two more deaths were reported by authorities in the neighboring state of Ohio.

The latest wave of storms comes after a string of twisters killed 13 earlier in the week.

In 2011, some 545 people were killed by tornadoes, which was the deadliest tornado season in the US since 1936.

Rocky time for Ahmadinejad amid big turnout

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Conservative rivals of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are leading in the race for Iranian parliament seats, according to early election results. In a huge embarrassment, Parvin Ahmadinejad, a younger sister of the president, was defeated by a conservative rival in their hometown of Garmsar.

The conservatives' lead was expected as the elections boiled down to a contest between conservatives supporting and opposing Ahmadinejad.

Early returns yesterday in the capital, Tehran, showed loyalists to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, were pulling ahead. Partial results from provincial towns showed conservative Ahmadinejad rivals elected in many constituencies.

The results indicate Ahmadinejad may face a more hostile parliament in the nearly two years remaining of his second term in office.

Iran's media reported a huge turnout on Friday in parliamentary elections, considered as the most sensitive vote in the history of the Islamic republic.

With political discontent at home and international pressure making the regime vulnerable, turnout will be a litmus test for the legitimacy of its leaders.

Iran's opposition, crushed in recent years and banned from running in the elections, largely called for a country-wide boycott of the vote.

Despite the boycott, reports from Iran suggested many people, especially those in small and conservative cities, participated in the vote.

Iran's interior minister, Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, was quick to predict a high turnout and Tehran's governor, Morteza Tamadon, said there was a record vote in the capital.

Some observers believe that the results will only consolidate Khamenei's power more than ever in the parliament, making an already lame-duck president more isolated. Ahmadinejad's term ends in 2013.

India business team to visit Iran defying West

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian trade delegation will travel to Iran next week to explore business openings created by US-led sanctions over the Islamic republic's disputed nuclear programme, an export group says.

The group will visit Iran from March 10-14, the Federation of Indian Export Organisations said late Friday, adding exporters had settled a major problem on how to receive payments from Tehran in the face of sanctions on dollar deals.

"We are expecting to get a lot of business from this trip," Anand Seth, spokesman for the Federation of Indian Export Organisations, an Indian government partner in promoting trade, told AFP.

The top trade organisation, set up by the government, said Indian exporters would be paid for goods sent to Iran using a rupee payment system.

Iran is India's second-largest oil supplier after Saudi Arabia, providing around 12 percent of the fast-growing country's crude needs.

India has been examining ways to step up trade with Iran amid problems in settling its oil bills from Iran as a result of the intensifying sanctions campaign aimed at forcing Tehran to abandon its nuclear programme.

India's Congress party-led government says it will abide only by UN sanctions on the Islamic republic, and will not implement those by individual nations.

Evacuation ordered as floods hit Australia

AFP, Sydney

Thousands of Australians were ordered to evacuate their homes yesterday in Sydney's northwest and elsewhere in New South Wales state as heavy rainfall flooded rivers and waterways.

State Emergency Service Commissioner said that 3,500 people were subject to evacuation orders as 75 percent of the state was affected by flooding.

The swollen Hawkesbury-Nepean was threatening areas on Sydney's semi-rural north-western outskirts.

Days of heavy rain after a damp summer have seen Sydney's Warragamba Dam, the main source of the city's drinking water, reach capacity for the first time in 14 years -- causing the water to flow over its spillways Friday.

Egypt MPs to probe NGO travel ban lift

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's parliament is to probe and "hold accountable" anyone who intervened to allow foreign activists on trial to leave the country, the house speaker said yesterday.

Saad al-Katani said parliament would summon officials to explain the decision and "hold accountable those responsible for this crime, which represented a blatant intervention in the affairs of Egypt's judiciary."

After months of pressure from Washington, about 15 of the foreign defendants including Americans were allowed to fly out of Cairo airport on Thursday after posting bail, sparking outrage in Egypt.

The trial, in which the activists were accused of receiving illicit foreign funds to operate unlicensed NGOs, caused a crisis in relations between the United States and its close Middle Eastern ally.

Egyptian authorities had insisted they could not intervene in a judicial matter, but the trial, which opened last Sunday, began to unravel as the judges stepped aside and a travel ban on the defendants was lifted.

The foreigners were rushed through Cairo airport on to a private plane after having each posted bail of two million pounds.

The official Al-Ahram newspaper said the judges refused themselves after they were requested to lift the travel ban, outraging Egyptians across the political spectrum at alleged political interference.

BP settles Gulf of Mexico oil spill lawsuit

GUARDIAN ONLINE

BP will pay out \$7.8bn (£5bn) to settle a lawsuit with thousands of individuals from the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster, under an agreement reached late on Friday night.

The settlement, announced by Judge Carl Barbier, was reached just ahead of Monday's trial in a New Orleans court. The trial, already delayed by a week to allow extra time for negotiations, has been postponed again.

With one major settlement achieved, BP will probably redouble its efforts to reach a deal with the federal government over fines related to the spill.

In a statement late on Friday night, the oil company said it would use the remainder of the \$20bn compensation fund raised in the summer of 2010 to settle claims with tens of thousands of shrimp boat captains, condo owners and others who suffered losses in the spill. The company said it had already paid out about \$8bn from the fund.

Eleven men were killed in the 20 April 2010 blowout on the Deepwater Horizon. By the time BP regained control of its well 87 days later, the Gulf was fouled by some 4.9m barrels of crude, destroying shrimp and oyster harvests and the tourist season.

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