

US plan to strike Iran 'ready'

Tehran vows never to renounce nuke 'rights'

AGENCIES

US plans for a possible military strike on Iran are ready and the option is "fully available", the US ambassador to Israel said, days before Tehran resumes talks with world powers which suspect it of seeking to develop nuclear arms.

Like Israel, the United States has said it considers military force a last resort to prevent Iran using its uranium enrichment to make a bomb. Iran insists its nuclear program is for purely civilian purposes.

"It would be preferable to resolve this diplomatically and through the use of pressure than to use military force," Ambassador Dan Shapiro said in remarks about Iran aired by Israel's Army Radio on Thursday.

"But that doesn't mean that option is not fully available - not just available, but it's ready. The necessary planning has been done to ensure that it's ready," said Shapiro, who the radio station said had spoken on Tuesday.

Israel, which is widely assumed to have the

Middle East's only atomic arsenal, feels threatened by the prospect of its arch-foe Iran going nuclear and has hinted it could launch preemptive war.

But many analysts believe the United States alone has the military clout to do lasting damage to Iran's nuclear program.

Meanwhile, Tehran's chief nuclear negotiator yesterday said Iran rejects Western pressures over its nuclear activities and will never give up its rights ahead of crunch talks with world powers in Baghdad next week.

"The Iranian people will never give up even an iota of their rights," Saeed Jalili said, in reference to the Islamic republic's nuclear drive which the West suspects is masking a weapons programme. Tehran vehemently denies the charge.

"I advise Western officials against making calculated mistakes. In Baghdad, we can negotiate for cooperation on the basis of respect for Iran's undeniable rights," Jalili said.

Jalili was defiant, insisting that sanctions and international pressure were not affecting Iran's determination.



Exilid Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer, centre, holds a rally to protest against the Chinese government in Tokyo yesterday. Kadeer closed a four-day conference during which she had claimed her people were in a fight for their survival because of increasing repression in China.

US names Myanmar ambassador

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday picked Myanmar envoy Derek Mitchell as the first US ambassador to the country for more than 20 years, in a step marking the restoration of full diplomatic relations.

Obama made the announcement hours after easing investment curbs on Myanmar, but maintaining wider sanctions against former junta leaders in a bid to retain maximum leverage to encourage a "nascent" political reform effort.

Mitchell, who has to be confirmed by the US Senate, is currently serving as the special representative for Myanmar policy at the State Department.

Washington withdrew its ambassador to Myanmar, also known as Burma, after a crackdown on a democracy uprising in 1988.

Indian parties voice support to Sangma

THE HINDU ONLINE



PA Sangma

Injecting a new element in the presidential race, BJD and AIADMK appeared to be coming together to sponsor NCP leader and former Lok Sabha Speaker PA Sangma as a candidate in the coming presidential election.

Odisha Chief Minister and ruling BJD supremo Naveen Patnaik yesterday gave his party's backing to the 65-year-old tribal leader from Meghalaya.

"I think Sangma ought to be candidate for the highest post for the Rashtrapati Bhavan," he told reporters.

Describing Sangma as a prominent tribal leader, who had the experience of occupying the post of Lok Sabha Speaker, Patnaik said that he has already spoken to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and AIADMK general secretary Jayalalithaa on the matter.

He had visited Chennai last week and met Jayalalithaa after their parleys last month in Delhi. The BJD leader, who said he had received a letter from the NCP leader on Wednesday, added he had consultations with senior leaders of the BJD before coming out with the backing for Sangma.

Interestingly, Sangma's own party has not taken any decision on what it proposes to do in the election. NCP supremo Sharad Pawar had already met Congress president Sonia Gandhi and held discussions on the issue.

Bulgaria bans smoking in public places

AP, Sofia

Bulgaria's parliament has adopted a total ban on smoking in indoor public places, after earlier attempts failed due to strong opposition from restaurant owners.

The ban, which was approved yesterday and comes into force on June 1, has stirred discontent among many Bulgarians, at least 40 percent of whom are believed to smoke.

Bulgaria's smoky restaurants and cafes are at the heart of the social life in this traditional, tobacco-growing country of 7.3 million people.

Many owners of such establishments fear the ban will scare away customers and ruin business in a European Union nation that already is struggling with an economic slowdown.

Iran sending arms to Syria defying UN

REUTERS, United Nations

Syria remains the top destination for Iranian arms shipments in violation of a UN Security Council ban on weapons exports by the Islamic Republic, according to a confidential report on Iran sanctions-busting seen by Reuters on Wednesday.

Iran, like Russia, is one of Syria's few allies as it presses ahead with a 14-month old assault on opposition forces determined to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The new report, submitted by a panel of sanctions-monitoring experts to the Security Council's Iran sanctions committee, said the panel investigated three large illegal shipments of Iranian weapons over the past year.

"Iran has continued to defy the international community through illegal arms shipments," it stated. "Two of these cases involved (Syria), as were the majority of cases inspected by the Panel during its previous mandate, underscoring that Syria continues to be the central party to illicit Iranian arms transfers."

The third shipment involved rockets that Britain said last year were headed for Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

The kinds of arms that Iran was attempting to send to Syria before the shipments were seized by Turkish authorities included assault rifles, machine guns, explosives, detonators, 60mm and 120mm mortar shells and other items, the panel said.

Syria SNC chief resigns

Russia warns of 'hasty' Western wars

AFP, Damascus

Syrian National Council (SNC) chief Burhan Ghalioun yesterday said he is resigning to avert divisions within the opposition bloc, after activists on the ground accused him of monopolising power.

"I will not allow myself to be the candidate of division, I am not attached to a position, so I announce that I will step down after a new candidate has been chosen, either by consensus or through new elections," said the Paris-based academic.

His statement came as Syrian forces launched a blistering assault on the rebel stronghold Rastan in central Homs province, in a new bid to overrun one of the major opposition holdouts against President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Ghalioun, who has led by consensus rather than through election since the SNC's founding in October 2011, was re-elected as the exile group's chairman in a vote held in Rome on Tuesday.

Highlighting those divisions, the Local Coordination Committees, a network of activists on the ground, threatened hours earlier to



Burhan Ghalioun

pull out of the SNC over its lack of collaboration with activists in Syria and "monopolisation" of power.

"The deteriorating situation in the SNC is an impetus for us to take actions, which could begin with a freeze (of LCC membership in the SNC) and end with a withdrawal if errors are not solved and demands for reform go unmet," said the network.

Assad, in an interview with Russian TV, on Wednesday accused the West of ignoring violence by "terrorists" and said he would demand an explanation from Annan when he visits Damascus this month.

Meanwhile Russia cautioned Western powers against launching "hasty" wars that could lead to the rise of radical Islamist factions and all-out regional war.

"The consequence of hasty military operations in foreign states usually means that radicals come to power," said Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's premier and former president.

"And sometimes these actions -- which undermine state sovereignty -- could result in a fully-fledged regional war," he said, in clear reference to Moscow's current standoff with the West over Syria.



PHOTO: AFP

Congolese refugees are pictured at the border in Congo North Kivu province yesterday. An estimated 4000 people have fled fighting in Congo's Rutshuru district between the government army and mutinous rebels of the M23 movement.

CLIMATE DEAL, 2015 UN talks take first steps towards goal

AFP, Paris

UN members yesterday took their first steps in a marathon to negotiate a new global pact by 2015 that for the first time will place rich and poor under a common legal regime to tackle climate change.

Meeting in Bonn, the 195 parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) began wrangling over how to work towards the target enshrined at their landmark conference in Durban, South Africa, last December.

Maithe Nkoana-Mashabane of South Africa, who presided over the maiden session, urged countries as they embarked on the long road to set aside "old and unhelpful negotiating practices," a reference to the bickering that typically dogs climate talks.

The inaugural session of the ad-hoc working group, webcast over the Internet, took place in UNFCCC talks at senior level running in the former German capital to May 25.

If all goes well, a new accord will be wrapped up in 2015 and take effect in 2020, placing rich and poor under the same legal roof for tackling greenhouse-gas emissions that drive climate change. Rich countries bear most of the historical responsibility for global warming today. But they say it is unfair to shoulder the burden for fixing the problem in the future.

RARE EARTH EXPORTS China grants more quotas amid row

AFP, Shanghai

China, which is locked in a dispute with major trading partners over its control of rare earth minerals, yesterday announced additional export quotas for this year.

The Ministry of Commerce said it would allow companies to potentially export an additional 10,680 tonnes of rare earths, bringing the total for this year to 21,226 tonnes.

The United States, European Union and Japan lodged a complaint with the World Trade Organisation in March, saying China was choking off exports of rare earths to unfairly benefit domestic industries.

China, a producer of more than 95 percent of the world's rare earths, which are used in high-tech equipment from iPods to missiles, has set output caps and export quotas on the coveted resource.

Beijing has defended its practices, saying they aim to protect resources and the environment in an effort to promote sustainable development.

The ministry in December last year granted its first batch of 2012 export quotas totalling 10,546 tonnes for 11 companies.

The government has previously said its total export quotas for the sought-after commodities would remain roughly the same this year as in 2011.

Mladic trial halted over 'irregularities'

AFP, The Hague

The war crimes trial of former Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic was abruptly halted yesterday, just a day after it opened, because of prosecution "irregularities".

The decision was announced by the presiding judge shortly after the prosecution described the "horror" of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre it says was orchestrated by Mladic, the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II.

The judge Alphons Orie said there were "irregularities" in the transfer of prosecution documents to the defence to enable it to prepare for the trial, but that the court hoped to announce a date soon.

Mladic is charged with war crimes and genocide over the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia.

Greece forms technocrat cabinet ahead of vote

AFP, Athens

A caretaker technocrat government took office in Greece yesterday to organise the cash-strapped country's second elections in just six weeks after an inconclusive May 6 vote jolted the eurozone.

The team led by 67-year-old Panagiotis Pikrammenos, the head of Greece's top administrative court, is made up mainly of prominent university professors, a retired general and a diplomat.

The election left Greece in limbo, pushing the financial markets and euro down sharply, and the new poll on June 17 offers no guarantee of a viable government able to implement an EU-IMF bailout which has divided the country.

Outgoing prime minister Lucas Papademos yesterday warned that it would be "disastrous" for Greece to unilaterally reject the EU-IMF bailout but it could try for some adjustments in the terms in cooperation with its partners.



Panagiotis Pikrammenos

The European Union and the International Monetary Fund have warned that no new funds will be released if progress on pledged reforms and tough austerity measures falters.

Papademos took over as head of a technocrat government in November to ratify the EU-IMF bailout, supported by the main socialist Pasok and conservative New Democracy parties which suffered badly in the May 6 voter backlash.

The caretaker administration was appointed after Greece's political parties failed to cobble together a coalition following the May 6 elections which saw a voter backlash against austerity and in which no clear victor emerged.

Radical left-wing party Syriza, which is vehemently opposed to what it brands "barbaric" austerity measures and has threatened to tear up the bailout deal, is a favourite to win after coming second in the May 6 election.

NEWS IN brief

Nepal PM expands cabinet

TNN, Kathmandu

Nepal's Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai on Wednesday added seven more ministers to his cabinet, increasing its size to 19, a day after the major political parties reached an agreement on the contentious issues for the new constitution.

On Tuesday, Nepal's third biggest party, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) agreed to join the cabinet, to make the current government consensually representative.

With Wednesday's expansion the cabinet has representation from 13 different political parties, six more parties joining in the latest addition.

China dissident to get passport

BBC ONLINE

Dissident Chen Guangcheng said he and his family have completed passport applications and officials said they should be ready within 15 days.

The blind activist told the BBC officials had helped him fill in the forms on Wednesday at the Beijing hospital where he is staying.

Chen spent six days in the US embassy last month after spending house arrest. He wants to leave China

New Haiti cabinet inaugurated

AFP, Port-au-prince

A new Haitian government led by Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe officially began its duties Wednesday, capping a months-long political vacuum in the troubled nation.

President Michel Martelly, in office for a year, had lacked a cabinet chief since Garry Conville resigned a February.

Lamothe, 39, says he is basing his government policies on fighting extreme poverty and protecting the environment.

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