

Iran nuclear deal soon

Says IAEA chief; US readies new sanctions if talks fail

AFP, Vienna

The International Atomic Energy Agency will soon sign an accord with Iran aimed at trying to resolve disputes over its nuclear drive, the UN watchdog's chief Yukiya Amano said yesterday.

He made the announcement on his return to Vienna from a visit to Iran, and on the eve of talks between Tehran and world powers in Baghdad on the long-running crisis over the Islamic republic's atomic activities.

"A decision was made by me and Mr Jalili to reach an agreement on the structured approach," he said, referring to Iran's lead negotiator Saeed Jalili.

"At this stage, I can say it will be signed quite soon but I cannot say how soon it will be," he added, describing the agreement as an "important development".

Jalili said that the "existing differences will not be an obstacle to the agreement," Amano said, without elaborating.

He continued that the "important thing is I talked with policy makers, decision makers... directly and we understood each others' positions better. I think that is the reason why we could make this agreement."

Amano noted that he had discussed with Iranian authorities access to the Parchin military site, where the IAEA believes activity relevant to nuclear weapons development took place.

Iran says its nuclear programme, which has expanded in



Yukiya Amano

recent years, is for peaceful purposes, to generate electricity and provide medical isotopes, but many in the international community suspect the programme to be a front for a covert weapons drive.

The talks, set for tomorrow, are to be held between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany. The first round of talks was held in mid-April in Istanbul.

Meanwhile, the US Senate on Monday approved new sanctions against Iran aimed at convincing the Islamic Republic to suspend its uranium enrichment.

The bill allows President Barack Obama to impose sanctions on any country or company that enters joint ventures with Iran to develop its oil or uranium resource, or provides technology or resources to help Iran with such development.

It also includes measures against anyone who provides goods that "materially contribute to Iran's proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program or its terrorism-related activities."

Iran can either "come to Baghdad with a real plan" to end its nuclear program "or we'll make our own plan -- through sanctions or other necessary measures -- to ensure that Iran fails to achieve its nuclear ambitions," said Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, the bill's chief architect.

The bill must now be reconciled with sanctions approved by the US House of Representatives on December 14.



PHOTO: AFP

Railway officials and onlookers watch the clear up operation of the mangled remains of the Bangalore-bound Hampi Express after it collided with a stationary goods train near Ananthpur District, Andhra Pradesh in India yesterday. At least 25 people were killed in the accident.

Blast hits Damascus as Ban warns of all-out civil war

65 killed in 2 days; Nato rules out intervention

AFP, Damascus

Syrian security forces carried out a spate of raids in Damascus early yesterday after a deadly bombing hit the capital and UN chief Ban Ki-Moon warned the search for peace was at a "pivotal moment."

State television said the blast hit a restaurant in the Qaboon neighbourhood of the capital. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said five people were killed.

In all, at least 59 people were killed nationwide on Monday, including 31 loyalist troops who died in clashes with rebel fighters, the Observatory said.

The Observatory said dozens of people were arrested in the pre-dawn raids in several suburbs of the capital, including Douma, Harasta and Barzen.

It said powerful blasts were heard overnight in a number of provincial cities, including central Hama, northern Aleppo and the coastal cities of Banias and Latakia.

The watchdog said there were also fierce

clashes between regime forces and rebels in the town of Kfar Roma in Idlib province in the northwest.

The UN chief issued a new warning of the dangers of all-out civil war as the 14-month uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime has turned into an armed rebellion.

"The secretary general said we were at a pivotal moment in the search for a peaceful settlement to the crisis and that he remained extremely troubled about the risk of an all-out civil war," a spokesman for Ban said at a Nato summit in Chicago on Monday.

Meanwhile, Nato, which undertook a major air war in Libya to back rebels who fought Muammar Gaddafi's forces last year, has said it has "no intention" of taking military action against Assad's regime.

"We strongly condemn the behaviour of the Syrian security forces and their crack-downs on the Syrian population," Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen said on Sunday.

"But again Nato has no intention to intervene in Syria," he added.

NATO SUPPLY ROUTES Pakistan, US signal cautious optimism

AFP, Chicago

US and Pakistani leaders Monday signaled optimism that a deal on reopening vital supply routes to Nato convoys was within reach as Islamabad ordered negotiators to seal an agreement.

President Barack Obama told reporters the United States and Pakistan were making "diligent progress" on an accord, after he briefly met Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari on the sidelines of a Nato summit in Chicago.

Obama, however, said he had never expected the dispute to be solved during the Nato session.

Zardari, in a speech at the summit, suggested his government wanted to resolve the impasse.

Speaking to leaders from states in the Nato-led force in Afghanistan, Zardari said the cabinet's Defense Committee "decided to direct the relevant officials to conclude negotiations for resumption of the Ground Lines of Communication" needed to supply foreign troops.

His spokesman, Farhatullah Babar, later told reporters negotiators had been told to "expedite" the talks.

The Pakistani ambassador to the United States, Sherry Rehman, said she hoped that differences between the two sides could be resolved "as soon as possible."

Angered over a botched US air raid that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, Islamabad shut the supply routes in November, forcing Nato to rely on longer, more expensive northern routes through Russia and Central Asia.

Egypt to vote for president today

AFP, Cairo

A buzz of excitement swept through Cairo yesterday, a day before its first presidential election since an uprising overthrew Hosni Mubarak, ushering in a tumultuous military-led transition.

Around 50 million eligible voters are being called to choose Mubarak's successor today and tomorrow with a run-off scheduled for next month should there be no outright winner.

Campaigning for the landmark poll ended on Sunday night.

The main contenders are former foreign minister and Arab League chief Amr Mousa; Ahmed Shafiq, the last premier to serve under Mubarak; the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Mursi; independent Islamist Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh and Nasserist candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi.

INDIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION Sangma seeks support of political parties

PTI, New Delhi

NCP leader and former Lok Sabha Speaker P A Sangma, who is being backed by BJD and AIADMK for the President's post, yesterday sought to reach out to political parties, saying he hoped they will respond "to the call of conscience of the tribal people of the nation."

Sangma, who met BJD chief and Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik here along with some tribal MPs, claimed he has the support of the tribal leaders across the parties who are "fighting a common cause of projecting a tribal as a presidential candidate."

"We hope that other political groups including UPA and NDA will respond to the call of conscience of the nation by the tribal people and support us in the coming presidential election," he told reporters here flanked by Patnaik.

Asked if he was in touch with other political parties to garner support for Sangma, Patnaik said it was their duty to bring all political parties onboard on the issue of supporting the former Speaker.

"I think it is obvious my colleague Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha and I... of course we will be speaking to our colleagues who are many. It is our duty to gather together the political parties of the country (for supporting Sangma)... There has been a very encouraging response," he said.

Both Patnaik and Jayalalitha had announced their backing for Sangma on May 17, injecting a new element in the presidential race.



PHOTO: AFP

SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket heads for space after blasting off from Cape Canaveral, Florida.

New era in space begins

First private commercial rocket launched

AFP, Cape Canaveral

Opening a new era in private space flight, the US company SpaceX yesterday became the first commercial space lab to launch its own craft toward the International Space Station.

"Three, two, one and launch of the Space X Falcon 9 rocket, as NASA turns to the private sector to resupply the International Space Station," said NASA commentator George Diller, as the spacecraft blasted off at 3:44am (0744 GMT).

The test flight of the Dragon space capsule, which launched atop SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket, aims to show that commercial industry can restore US access to the ISS after NASA retired its space shuttle fleet last year.

The mission is set to include a fly-by and berthing with the station in the next three days, before the capsule returns to Earth at the end of this month.

Shortly after liftoff, the cargo-carrying spacecraft entered orbit and video images showed mission control staff at SpaceX headquarters in Hawthorne, California jumping from their seats, hugging and clapping.

No humans are traveling aboard the Dragon, but six astronauts are already at the \$100-billion space lab to help the capsule latch on, to unload supplies and then restock the capsule with cargo to take back to Earth.

On May 24, the spacecraft's sensors and flight systems are to undergo a series of tests to see if it is ready to berth, including a complicated fly-under at a distance of about 1.5

miles (2.5 kilometers).

If NASA gives the green light, the Dragon will then approach the ISS on May 25 in an attempt to berth with the station.

On May 31, the Dragon is to detach from the station and make a safe landing in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of southern California.

California-based SpaceX, owned by billionaire Musk, who also co-founded PayPal, is the first of several US competitors to try sending spacecraft to the ISS with the goal of restoring US access to space for human travelers by 2015.

"We are really at the dawn of a new era of space exploration, one where there is a much bigger role for commercial space companies," Musk said, likening the space effort to the rise of the Internet in the mid 1990s.

"The Internet was created as a government endeavor but then the introduction of commercial companies really accelerated the growth of the Internet and made it accessible to the mainstream," he added.

"I think we are actually at that stage and the success of this mission -- even what we have seen thus far -- I think bodes well for that new stage of space exploration."

Until now, only the space agencies of Russia, Japan and Europe have been able to send supply ships to the ISS.

The three-decade US shuttle program, which ferried astronauts and cargo to the research outpost, ended for good in 2011, leaving Russia as the sole taxi to the ISS until private industry comes up with a replacement.

Violence kills 11 in Karachi

DAWN ONLINE

At least eleven people were killed and more than 30 people wounded as violence erupted in Karachi after unidentified armed assailants opened fire at a political rally in the provincial capital yesterday, DawnNews reported.

The rally was organised by members and workers of Awami Tehrik Party, a small nationalist group in protest of the proposed Mohajir province and the recent operation in Lyari.

The rally was also attended by a large number of women.

After the procession started off from Lyari, unknown armed miscreants opened fire when it reached the areas of Nawa Lane, Pan Mandi and Juna Market.

Police said it was unclear who the attackers were. He said authorities were trying to restore order.

Tunisia to extradite Gaddafi's ex-PM

REUTERS, Tunis

Tunisia will extradite former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's prime minister to Libya and the handover could take place in "days or weeks", Justice Minister Nouredine Bouheiri yesterday said.

Should he be handed over, Al Baghdadi Ali al-Mahmoudi would be the first senior official to be sent back for trial under Libya's transitional leadership and his extradition could establish a precedent for other countries who have given refuge to or arrested members of Gaddafi's old entourage.

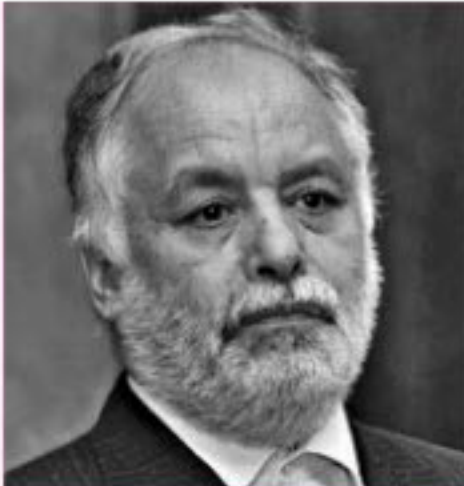
Mahmoudi served as the Libyan dictator's prime minister from 2006 until he fled to neighboring Tunisia around the time that rebel fighters took the capital Tripoli in August.

A Tunisian court ruled as far back as November that Mahmoudi should be extradited.

But President Moncef al-Marzouki later said the handover would not happen until the situation in Libya had stabilised and Mahmoudi could be guaranteed a fair trial after Gaddafi himself was killed by rebels and his rotting corpse left on display.

Officials from Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), in power since Gaddafi's ouster, have long called on their North African neighbor to turn over Mahmoudi for trial.

An NTC spokesman welcomed the news but said there were no firm arrangements yet in place for the move.



UPA govt may fall anytime

Says BJP after Mamata skips PM's dinner

PTI, New Delhi

As UPA completes three years in office in India, BJP yesterday claimed the government may fall anytime as coalition partners were unhappy and were not even ready to break bread together.

During a discussion on the issue at the party's Parliamentary Party meeting here, BJP while referring to Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee refusal to attend a dinner hosted by prime minister Manmohan Singh, said the three years of UPA regime would be written in "black letters."

That will be the third time the West Bengal chief minister would be absent in the dinner hosted by Singh on the lawns of his official 7 Race Course Road residence to mark the ruling UPA's second innings in power.



Mamata Banerjee

after the party's meeting.

Hussain said, "This government can anytime...(fall). The government claims to have a total majority of 272, but the actual figure seems 227 as even its allies are not happy with it."

The party also discussed the "failures" of the present regime, he said. Party leader L K Advani patted the back of MPs for their good performance during the Budget Session of Parliament, he said.

"Its allies are not happy with it. A leader of the ally party does not even want to eat food together. You can imagine the state of affairs... The UPA is not even in a position of eating snacks."

"The completion of three years of UPA regime will be written in black letters," said BJP spokesman Shah Nawaz Hussain

NEWS IN brief

US nuke chief resigns after spat

AFP, Washington

The head of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission announced his resignation Monday, just months after a public spat with colleagues over the need for proof of safety in the wake of Japan's disaster.

Gregory Jackzo said that after three years in the post, it was "the appropriate time" for him to fight for public safety in a different forum.

In February Jackzo was the sole commissioner to oppose the approval of the first new US reactors in decades. He argued for "binding commitments" from business that would address shortcomings highlighted by last year's Fukushima meltdown.

Regardless, commissioners voted 4-1 to approve the construction of two 1,100 megawatt Westinghouse-Toshiba reactors at a facility in Vogtle, Georgia.

Major child porn ring busted

AFP, Wellington

A global network that used social networking sites such as Facebook to distribute child pornography has been smashed after a tip-off from New Zealand authorities, officials yesterday said.

Investigators caught 55 people in 20 countries who were distributing child sexual abuse pictures and rescued 12 abused children, some of them babies, officials said.

New Zealand's internal affairs department said some of the suspects apprehended in the investigation, codenamed Operation Laminar, were involved in abusing the children depicted in the images.

It said the operation began in October 2010 when the department found significant amounts of images of child sexual abuse were being exchanged on sites including Facebook, Socialgo and gru.ps.

US envoy to Kabul to quit post

AFP, Kabul

The US ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, is to leave his post early, the embassy confirmed yesterday, a day after Nato leaders charted a path out of the Afghan war at a summit in Chicago.

The veteran diplomat, who was appointed to Kabul 10 months ago for a two-year term, previously served as the US envoy to Iraq, Pakistan and Syria.

"Amb Crocker has confirmed with regret that he will be leaving Kabul this summer," the embassy said on its Twitter feed.

No reason was given for Crocker's departure and an embassy official told AFP: "We have nothing further on that at this time."