

Iran threatens to target US bases if attacked

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran has warned the United States not to resort to military action against it, saying US bases in the region were vulnerable to the Islamic Republic's missiles, state media reported yesterday.

The comments by a senior Iranian military commander were an apparent response to US officials who have said Washington was ready to use military force to stop what it suspects is Iran's goal to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

World powers held talks with Iran in Baghdad on May 23-24 in an attempt to find a diplomatic solution to their concerns over its nuclear programme, which Tehran maintains is entirely peaceful. Another round was set for June 18-19 in Moscow.

"The politicians and the military men of the United States are well aware of the fact that all of their bases (in the region) are within the range of Iran's missiles and in any case ... are highly vulnerable," Press TV reported Brigadier-General Yahya Rahim Safavi as saying.

Safavi is a military adviser to Iran's clerical Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and was until 2007 the commander in chief of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the force that protects Iran's Islamic system of governance.

He also warned that Iranian missiles could reach all parts of Israel but played down any possibility of military action against his country as "faint" because of the current economic condition of the United States.

Analysts say Iranian military officials use such fiery rhetoric as a way of keeping the West on edge over the possible disruption to global oil supplies in the event of US or Israeli military action.

Tehran has previously threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz - a vital crude shipping lane - if it is attacked, which experts say would result in a spike in the price of oil and could hit the US economy as it seeks to recover from the financial crisis.

Last month the US ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, said plans for a possible military strike on Iran were ready and the option was "fully available".



British soldiers fire blank rounds during a 62 gun salute at the Tower of London in front of Tower Bridge yesterday to mark the start of four-day diamond jubilee weekend celebrations for Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, inset.

PHOTO:
AFP

Big Ben to be renamed after Queen

AFP, London

Britain's famed parliament clock tower Big Ben is set to be renamed the Elizabeth Tower in honour of the queen's diamond jubilee, a report said on Friday.

Prime Minister David Cameron is among 331 lawmakers who have signed up to a campaign to bestow the tribute to Queen Elizabeth to mark her 60th year on the throne, the Daily Mail reported.

It mirrors an honour bestowed on Queen Victoria -- the first British monarch to celebrate a diamond jubilee, back in 1897 -- after whom the square tower at the other end of the Houses of Parliament was renamed.

The 96-metre tower is formally known as the clock tower but is commonly known as Big Ben after the huge bell that it holds, whose distinctive "bongs" sound out the hours in central London.

Lawmakers accepted that the iconic tower which looms over the 19-century Gothic revival parliament would continue to be known colloquially as Big Ben.

The House of Commons Commission, the governing body of the British parliament, will meet by the end of June and is expected to agree on the renaming of Big Ben, the Daily Mail said.

Arabs urge UN action as Syria death toll soars

Six killed in Lebanon as violence crosses border

AFP, Damascus

Arab leaders called for UN action on Saturday as at least 27 people were killed in Syria amid growing global concern that Kofi Annan's peace plan is failing and the country descending into civil war.

The Arab League's ministerial committee on Syria, meanwhile, called on UN-Arab League envoy Annan to set a time frame for his mission.

"We request Annan to set a time frame for his mission because it is unacceptable that massacres and bloodshed continue while the mission is ongoing indefinitely," Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani told a meeting of the committee in Doha, attended by Annan.

"We demand the UN Security Council refer the six-point (Annan plan) to Chapter VII so that the international community could assume responsibilities," he added, without elaborating.

Chapter VII outlines action the Security Council might take, including military force, in response to threats to international peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression.

Earlier, Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi said he had asked the Security Council to take strong action to protect civilians in Syria but did not raise the question of intervention.

But asked if he had called for armed action against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Arabi said: "I have not referred to military intervention."

On the ground, Syrian troops conducted raids in search of anti-regime militants and clashed with rebels in several regions, with at least 27 people killed, including 15 soldiers, 11 civilians and one rebel, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Tensions spilled over into neighbouring Lebanon, as clashes between pro- and anti-Damascus gunmen killed 6 people and wounded 20 others in the northern city of Tripoli, a security source told AFP.

Sectarian violence has flared on a number of occasions in Tripoli since the revolt broke out in neighbouring Syria in March last year, including deadly street battles in May.



Aung San Suu Kyi waves to Myanmar refugees during her visit to the Mae La refugee camp near the Thai-Myanmar border yesterday. Myanmar democracy icon was given a rapturous welcome by thousands of Myanmar refugees forced by fighting and human rights abuses in their homeland to live in a Thai border camp.

PHOTO: AFP

QUEEN ELIZABETH II IN NUMBERS

- Queen Victoria was the last and the only previous British monarch to celebrate a diamond jubilee, in 1897. Queen Elizabeth II is the oldest British monarch to celebrate one, being 85 on the 60th anniversary of her accession, while Victoria was 77.

- Only three other world head of states have celebrated diamond jubilees during Queen Elizabeth's reign. Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej marked his in 2006; the Sultan of Johor, which is now part of Malaysia, celebrated his in 1955; and Emperor Hirohito of Japan celebrated his in 1986.

- Queen Elizabeth II is the 40th monarch since William the Conqueror who obtained the crown of England in 1066.

- There have been 12 British prime ministers since the queen acceded to the throne.

- There have been 11 US presidents during her reign.

- There have been six Popes during the queen's reign.

- She has been on 261 official overseas visits to 116 countries.

AFP, LONDON

No genocide in Srebrenica Says Serbian president

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Serbia's new president on Friday denied genocide took place in Srebrenica, contradicting the international criminal prosecution of Serbian leaders from the Yugoslav wars and angering the Muslim co-president of Bosnia.

Tomislav Nikolic, the rightwinger elected as Serbian president last month, said on Montenegrin television: "There was no genocide in Srebrenica. In Srebrenica, grave war crimes were committed by some Serbs who should be found, prosecuted and punished."

"It is very difficult to indict someone and prove before a court that an event qualifies as genocide."

The former Serbian general Ratko Mladic is on trial in The Hague accused of genocide in Srebrenica. Bosnian Serb forces under his command slaughtered around 8,000 Muslim men and boys after capturing the town, which had been declared a safe haven by the United Nations, towards the end of Bosnia's 1992-95 war. It was Europe's worst atrocity since the second world war.

The Bosnian Serbs' wartime political leader, Radovan Karadzic, is also on trial in The Hague accused of genocide.

Bakir Izetbegovic, who shares Bosnia's presidency with a Croat and a Serb, said Nikolic's comments were insulting to the survivors. "The denial of genocide in Srebrenica ... will not pave the way for co-operation and reconciliation in the region, but on the contrary may cause fresh misunderstandings and tensions."

"By giving such statements Nikolic has clearly demonstrated that he is still not ready to face the truth about the events that took place in our recent past."

Both the international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the international court of justice (ICJ) have ruled that the Srebrenica massacre amounted to genocide.

Nikolic's win over the incumbent president, Boris Tadic, sent a chill through a region that still recalls his last spell in government as deputy prime minister in a coalition with Serbia's late strongman Slobodan Milosevic when Nato bombed Serbia to drive its forces out of Kosovo during

Leaks and power plays in Vatican City

AGENCIES

A book reproducing the private correspondence of Pope Benedict XVI has angered the Vatican and forms part of a series of leaks revealing allegations of corruption and internal conflicts.

Pope Benedict complained bitterly at his latest general audience about the international media. He said they had unfairly latched on to the admittedly very unusual story of the arrest of his butler, to distort the truth about recent goings-on at the Catholic Church's power centre here in Rome.

Yet he looked saddened and understandably angry about this invasion of his privacy in his own home on the top floor of the Apostolic Palace.

Experts say the flood of secret Vatican documents leaked to the press, enraging the Holy See, aims to oust the Church's powerful number two and maybe to replace the pope himself.

The so-called "Vatileaks" scandal is a plot within the intrigue-filled Vatican City to unseat Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, seen by some as wielding too much power and not acting in the Church's interests, they say.

"The documents that have been leaked all concern Bertone in one way or another,"



Pope Benedict XVI

Marco Politi, Vatican expert for Il Fatto Quotidiano daily, told AFP.

"This is all about damaging him to get a new secretary of state," he added.

As the Vatican moves to root out whistle blowers who have been copying and leaking private documents straight from Pope Benedict XVI's desk, rumours have been circulating in the Italian media over whether the plot may run deeper.

Frustration over the management of Church scandals in recent years -- from allegations of money-laundering to clerical sex abuse -- has apparently led some to begin preparing the way for their chosen candidate to become future pope.

"A group of cardinals has begun to act on a very ambitious aim: to take the secretary of state, and then, conquer the conclave (the assembly which elects a new pope) with a chosen pope among them," said La Repubblica newspaper.

Bertone, a close ally of Benedict, has sparked controversy in some quarters, in particular over his management of the Vatican bank, which has come to symbolise the opacity and scandal gripping the Holy See's administration.

The leaked documents have shed light on many Vatican secrets, including the Church's tax problems, child sex scandals

US drone kills 3 Pak militants

AFP, Peshawar

A US drone strike targeting a vehicle in Pakistan's north-western tribal belt killed at least three militants yesterday, security officials said, the latest in a recent spate of attacks.

The strike -- the sixth in 11 days -- took place in Khawashi Khel village, five kilometers west of Wana, the main town in the South Waziristan tribal district which borders Afghanistan, a Pakistani security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"The US drone fired two missiles which completely destroyed the vehicle. At least three militants have been killed," the security official said.

Another official said the attack took place as militants were trying to move from one area to another near the border.

Washington considers Pakistan's semi-autonomous northwestern tribal belt the main hub of Taliban and al-Qaeda militants plotting attacks on the West and in Afghanistan.

Wrong time to 'make waves' in Asia

China warns US against naval move

AFP, Beijing

China's official news agency yesterday warned it was no time to "make waves" in the disputed South China Sea after the US said it would shift the bulk of its naval fleet to the Pacific Ocean by 2020.

"It is advisable for some to refrain from muddying the waters and fishing therein," said Xinhua, referring to the sea, which is part of the Pacific and the subject of overlapping territorial claims.

China claims the sea in full, and it is also claimed in whole or part by Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines.

"As regards the South China Sea tensions, it is some other claimants, whether emboldened by the United States' new posture or not, that sparked the fire and have been stoking the flames," said the agency.

It was Beijing's "genuine wish" to turn the South China Sea "into a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation," added Xinhua, in the commentary entitled "Not to make waves in South China Sea."

Pentagon chief Leon Panetta announced the decision to deploy more ships to the Pacific as part of a new strategic focus on Asia earlier Saturday at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.



PHOTO: AFP

File photo of amphibious ship USS Essex and the Essex Amphibious Ready Group in the Andaman Sea off the coast to Myanmar.

China arrests high level US spy

AFP, Washington

China has detained a top security official for passing sensitive information to the United States in the highest-level spy case involving the two countries since the 1980s, reports said.

Citing an unnamed "person with knowledge of the case," The New York Times said the official, who was arrested earlier this year, was believed to be an employee in the Ministry of State Security, China's main intelligence agency.

Hong Kong's New Way magazine said the detained official was a secretary to a vice minister at the ministry.

The vice minister, who was not named, has also been suspended from duty, the New Way report said.

"The incident has caused the concerns and worries of Chinese top leadership, and (President) Hu Jintao has ordered an investigation to get to the bottom of the matter," the magazine said, adding that Hu was "shocked and angry."