

Iran nuclear talks return to Geneva

Delicate talks between Iran and world powers on how to implement a landmark nuclear deal were to resume in Geneva yesterday, as France's foreign minister cast doubt on their chance of success.

The technical talks were set to begin at 3:00pm in the Swiss city, Iran's deputy foreign minister and lead negotiator Abbas Araqchi told Iranian state television.

Experts held four days of talks in Vienna last week, but the Iranians walked out after Washington expanded its sanctions blacklist against Tehran. Tehran was prepared to continue the talks after EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton "made the assurance that the world powers, particularly the United States, will continue the talks in goodwill... and that they are serious about implementing the deal," Araqchi told Iran's state broadcaster on Wednesday.

Under the deal struck in Geneva on November 24, Iran agreed to roll back parts of its nuclear programme for six months in exchange for modest sanctions relief and a promise by Western powers not to impose new sanctions.

During the six-month nuclear freeze, which has not yet begun, Iran and world powers aim to hammer out a long-term comprehensive accord to decisively end the standoff over Iran's contested nuclear programme, after a decade of failed attempts and rising tensions.

Iran denies wanting nuclear weapons but many in the international community suspect otherwise, and neither Israel -- widely considered to be the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear-armed state -- nor Washington have ruled out military action.

The fresh round of negotiations is scheduled to last through today, but could be extended into the weekend.

Morgan mistaken for Mandela

An Indian owner of a billboard dedicated to Nelson Mandela was red-faced yesterday after the discovery that a photo of actor Morgan Freeman was used instead of one of the anti-apartheid hero.

The billboard was erected on the side of a road in the southern city of Coimbatore as part of memorials across India which declared five days of national mourning. Mandela died on

India, US try to tone down row

News Delhi demands apology, case to be dropped after Kerry expresses regret

India yesterday urged the United States to drop the case against a female diplomat who was arrested and strip-searched and apologise for her "terrible" treatment, ratcheting up pressure in the blistering diplomatic row.

US Secretary of State John Kerry expressed "regret" over the episode in New York, and India's Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid said he hoped the "valuable relationship" with Washington would soon return to an even keel.

But in a sign of the bruised pride and humiliation felt in India, Khurshid reiterated calls for the visa fraud case against the diplomat to be withdrawn and branded her treatment as "terrible".

"We have asked for the case to be dropped and withdrawn ... we are not convinced that there are legitimate grounds for pursuing it," Khurshid told foreign journalists.

"I cannot believe if a US senator was arrested he would be put through this behaviour....I would rather not prejudice. Let us allow the

DIPLOMAT'S HARASSMENT



American government to respond."

Kerry tried to end the row in a phone call to India's national security adviser on Wednesday, expressing regret and stressing concern that the issue not be allowed to hurt a "vital relationship."

But Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kamal Nath said "a mere regret won't make us happy. They must offer a clear apology and accept that they made a mistake, that is what we will be satisfied with."

The row was sparked by last Thursday's arrest of Devyani Khobragade, India's deputy consul general at its mission in New York, as she dropped her children off at school.

The 39-year-old, who is now free on bail, was detained over allegations that she paid an Indian domestic worker in New York a fraction of the minimum wage and lied about the employee's salary in a visa application.

Subsequent revelations that she was strip-searched have caused outrage in India and prompted a series of reprisals, including the

removal of protective barricades outside the American embassy.

However Preet Bharara, the US federal prosecutor handling her case, has insisted Khobragade was arrested in the "most discreet" way possible, was not handcuffed and was "fully searched" by a female deputy marshal in private as part of standard procedure.

Khurshid confirmed India was transferring Khobragade to its UN mission in New York to secure her full diplomatic immunity, instead of the partial immunity she currently has. However such a move could prove complicated as any change of designation requires the US State Department's approval.

In an interview with Indian television, Khurshid acknowledged there was "a sense of hurt" over the treatment of the diplomat at a time when the Obama administration is looking to bolster ties with Delhi.

"Things happen between friends, even things that are terrible," he told the CNN-IBN network.

"My duty is not to allow anyone to damage relations," he also told reporters. "We hope it will return to

US panel calls for sweeping reform

A White House-picked panel Wednesday recommended curbing the secretive powers of the National Security Agency (NSA), warning that its mass spying sweeps in the war on terror had gone too far.

The report said the NSA should halt the mass storage of domestic phone records, and called for new scrutiny on snooping on world leaders plus privacy safeguards for foreigners and fresh transparency over US eavesdropping.

The 300-page report unveiled 46 recommendations to reshape US surveillance policy following explosive revelations by fugitive intelligence contractor Edward Snowden which outraged US allies and civil liberties advocates.

The report, by a five-man panel of legal and intelligence experts, was commissioned by President Barack Obama himself -- yet puts him in a tricky political spot between those demanding change and the US intelligence community.

However, there is no guarantee the president will accept the non-binding recommendations.

The panel urged reforms of a secret national security court that oversees clandestine surveillance operations and an end to bulk retention of telephone "metadata" by the National Security Agency (NSA).

Mass collection of billions of telephone records could still go on -- but the "metadata" should not be kept by the NSA but in private hands, to permit specific queries by the agency or law enforcement, if national security is deemed at risk.

The NSA currently pours over telephone and Internet data to seek patterns of communications between extremists.

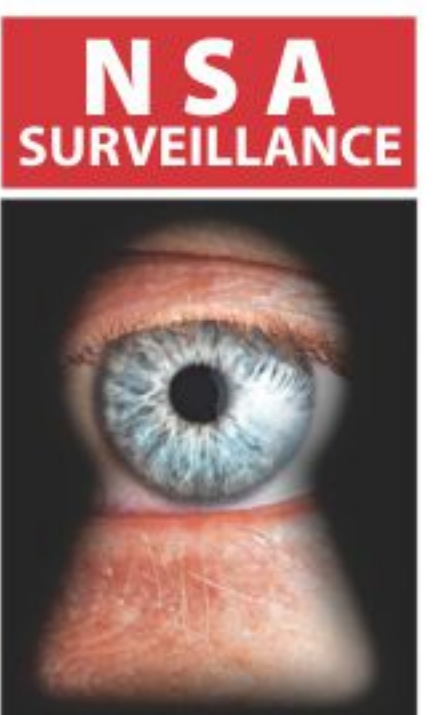
Throughout, the report argued that a new equilibrium needed to be found between national security, and privacy and individual Constitutional rights.

It steered away from calling for outright curbs on gathering intelligence on foreign leaders. But it said US spy chiefs should be forced to justify surveillance on world leaders to the president and his aides.

The panel said a secret court handling foreign intelligence requests should have a "public interest advocate" so that it can hear more than only the government's arguments.

And it agreed with major technology companies which have been seeking to release more information on the numbers of national security requests they receive, and said the government should release numbers of its own.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday supported NSA surveillance saying it is necessary to fight terrorism. Putin's comment at a major news conference was surprising support for Obama's administration, which has faced massive criticism over NSA activities.



US envoy to the United Nations Samantha Power (C) speaks with children in a refugee camp near Bangui's airport after arriving into Central African Republic, yesterday on a surprise visit to urge its leaders to help end the violence, warning the people there were "in profound danger." Power is the highest-level US official to visit Central Africa, which has plunged into brutal anarchy with inter-religious violence that has killed hundreds of people.

PHOTO: AFP

Thirty-nine executed in US this year

Thirty-nine executions were carried out in the past year in the United States while more than 3,100 inmates still linger on death row, the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) said.

This only the second time in 19 years that there have been fewer than 40 executions in US, the watchdog said in its annual report.

Eighty death sentences were handed down, two more than last year but still far below the peak of 315 seen in 1994 and 1996, it added.

Despite its advocacy against capital punishment, the United States ranks fifth in the top 10 list of nations with the most executions between 2007 and 2012, according to Amnesty International.

China tops the table with "thousands" of executions, followed by Iran and Saudi Arabia, the human rights group has said.

Of the 3,108 inmates on death row around the United States, the biggest number are in California (731) followed by Florida (412) and Texas (298).

Citing an annual Gallup poll, the center said popular support for the death penalty among Americans is, at 60 percent, at its lowest level in four decades.

Thirty-two of the 50 US states have the death penalty, after Maryland earlier this year abolished capital punishment.

The UN General Assembly called in 2007 and 2008 for a worldwide moratorium on the death penalty -- an EU initiative that the United States voted against alongside the likes of China, North Korea and Iran.

US EXECUTIONS IN PAST 5 YEARS	
42	IN 2007
37	IN 2008
52	IN 2009
46	IN 2010
43	IN 2011
43	IN 2012

CORRUPTION CHARGES Egypt's ex-PM, Mubarak sons acquitted

An Egyptian court has acquitted Ahmed Shafiq, a former prime minister and presidential candidate, and two sons of ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak, of corruption charges.

Shafiq fled to the United Arab Emirates shortly after he narrowly lost to the Islamist Mohamed Morsi in a 2012 presidential election, a year before Morsi's overthrow by the military.

He faces another corruption trial, as do Mubarak's sons Alaa and Gamal, and has not publicly said whether he would return and run in elections this year if acquitted of all charges.

The verdict in Shafiq's last remaining case is expected later yesterday, his lawyer Farid al-Deeb told AFP.

An acquittal should allow him to return to Egypt.

The military-installed government plans parliamentary and presidential elections by autumn 2014, amid widespread speculation that military chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will compete and win.

Mubarak's sons still face separate corruption trials, including one with their father, who is also accused of involvement in the killings of protesters during the uprising that forced him out.



Gaia Space Telescope

The European Space Agency yesterday launched the Gaia telescope -- an advanced telescope -- designed to detect a billion stars and provide the most detailed map yet of the Milky Way and our place in it.

The 740-million-euro (\$1.02-billion) device, the most sophisticated space telescope ever built by Europe, aims at building an "astronomical census" of a billion stars, or around one percent of all the stars in the Milky Way.

By repeating the observations as many as 70 times throughout its mission, Gaia can help astronomers calculate the distance, speed, direction and motion of these stars and build a 3-D map of our section of the galaxy.

1,000,000,000,000,000
petacets of data to be transmitted to Earth from the telescope (equivalent to 30,000 CD-ROMS)

1,000,000,000
stars to be inventoried

1,000,000,000
pixels: the sensitivity of Gaia's camera

500,000
quasars to be studied

15,000
planets outside the Solar System could be detected

The Milky Way
100 billion stars
Formed 13.2 billion years ago

80,000 light years

Sun

Launched
December 19
Kourou, F. Guyana

Source: CNES - AFP

EU summit buoyed by landmark bank deal

The European Union took a historic leap towards greater integration just hours ahead of a summit yesterday, with a deal on a banking union to prevent a re-run of the eurozone's recent crisis.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, just beginning a fresh four-year mandate, will be closely watched at the summit for her response to the agreement, which marks one of the biggest transfers of national sovereignty to the EU since the creation of the single currency.

The deal is expected to bolster her pledge this week to build a stronger Europe, together with key partner France.

The EU's 28 member states sealed the landmark bank deal drawn up after collapsing banks drove countries such as Ireland into international bailouts and brought the economy to a halt.

The accord opens the way to create a single body to police and wind up ailing banks, backed up by a fund set up by banks themselves to cover the cost to avoid using taxpayers' money.

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Professor	Associate Professor	Assistant Professor	
At least 3 years full-time teaching experience in a particular field/ subject as Professor. At least 7 research articles published in refereed medical journals 3 in the last 3 years (as first author) and 2 in the Index Medicas.	At least 3 years full-time teaching experience in a particular field/ subject as Associate Professor. At least 5 research articles published in refereed medical journals 2 in the last 2 years (as first author) and 1 (one) in the Index Medicas.	At least 3 research articles published in refereed medical journals.	
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