

IRAN NUKE TALKS

Kerry, Zarif race against the clock

AFP, Vienna

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart went face to face again yesterday with time running out to nail down a landmark nuclear deal in marathon talks in Vienna.

Ahead of tomorrow's final deadline, there were signs that inside the neoclassical palace-turned-hotel hosting the past nine days of talks in a hot Vienna that the end may be in sight.

The foreign ministers of France, Germany and Britain were expected back in the Austrian capital in the evening, followed possibly on Monday by their Russian and Chinese counterparts.

"Extending the talks is not an option for anyone... We are trying to finish the job," Iran's lead negotiator Abbas Araghchi told Iranian TV late Saturday, saying there was a "positive atmosphere".

But he added: "If we reach an agreement that respects our red lines then there will be a deal. Otherwise we prefer to return home to Tehran empty-handed."

Kerry said yesterday that "it is now time" to finalise a historic nuclear deal with Iran, on a ninth day of talks in Vienna between Tehran and major powers.

"It is now time to see whether or not we are able to close an agreement," Kerry told reporters ahead of tomorrow's deadline, saying that at present, the negotiations "could go either way".

"Over the past few days we have in fact made genuine progress, but I want to be absolutely clear with everybody we are not yet where we need to be on several of the most difficult issues," Kerry said.

"While I completely agree... that we have never been closer, at this point this negotiation could go either way," he said.

Building on a framework deal struck in April, the six nations want Iran to dismantle large parts of its nuclear programme for at least 10 years in exchange for progressive relief from sanctions.

This, the powers hope, will put an Iranian nuclear bomb out of reach -- an aim Tehran denies having -- and end a 13-year standoff that has at times threatened to escalate into armed conflict.

"If hard choices get made in the next couple of days, and made quickly, we could get an agreement this week. But if they are not made, we will not. So our teams remain very hard at work in the coming hours and days, we're going to go as hard as we can," Kerry said.



Syrian men walk amidst the rubble and debris in the Qadi Askar district of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday. Two alliances of Syrian rebels battled to advance in government-held western Aleppo, seizing an army barracks in one district but losing ground in others, in some of the fiercest fighting in the city since the conflict began.

PHOTO: AFP

Nine days in the Greek debt crisis

AFP, Athens

Here is a look at recent financial and political drama in Greece.

June 27: Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras calls a referendum on whether or not to accept the terms of the latest round of bailout aid.

June 28: The European Central Bank says it will maintain an emergency cash lifeline to Greece but not increase its level, raising the risk of a liquidity crunch.

June 29: European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker says he feels "betrayed" by the Greek actions.

June 30: Tsipras seeks a 30-billion-euro deal with the European Stability Mechanism to cover state financing needs and restructure Greece's crushing debt.

July 1: German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble presses Athens to "clarify its position on what it wants".

July 2: Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis says he will resign if voters do not back the government today.

July 3: The EFSF declares "an event of default by Greece" after the missed IMF payment.

July 4: As tensions grow on the eve of the vote, Varoufakis accuses Athens' creditors of "terrorism" and scare-mongering, denying reports that Greek savers could lose 30 percent of their deposits to shore up the banks.

July 5: Brisk voting began on the referendum on conditions attached to a bailout extension offer made to Greece last month which expired on Tuesday.

EU could grant emergency loans to Athens

AFP, Berlin

Europe will not "desert" the people of Greece regardless of the outcome of yesterday's referendum and may provide it emergency loans, the head of the European Parliament said yesterday.

Martin Schulz told Germany's Welt am Sonntag newspaper that the Athens government had manoeuvred the heavily-indebted country "into a dead end".

"Perhaps we will have to give emergency bridging loans to Greece so that public service can be maintained and needy people get the money they need to survive," he said.

"For that, money would be available short term in Brussels," the European Parliament president said in the interview.

But he warned this would not be a lasting solution.

Greeks are voting in a tightly fought referendum on whether to support the terms of the country's potential bailout deal with its international creditors.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has urged a 'No' vote.

Fidel Castro seen in rare public outing

AFP, Havana

Cuban state television broadcast images Saturday of former president Fidel Castro meeting cheese experts during a rare trip outside his Havana home.

Seemingly alert and sharp, the 88 year old was shown seated at a panel organized by the Food Industry Ministry's research institute on Friday, speaking at length with the "cheese masters."

"Fidel spoke for more than four hours with 19 cheese masters participating in a training program" in Guatao, near Havana, official media said.

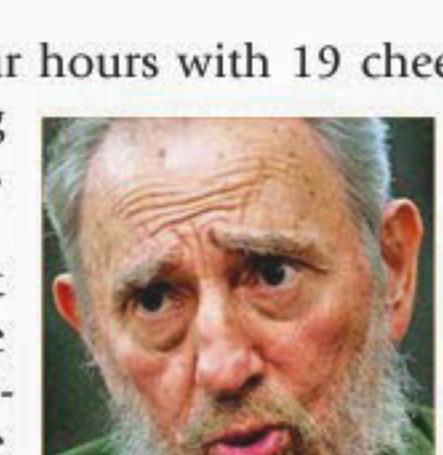
Wearing a light-colored tracksuit over a checkered shirt, Castro spoke of the "problems affecting the population's nutrition, like climate change and frequent wars."

Castro, who his biographers say has been passionate about cheese-making since the 1960s, was interested in the quality and production levels of cheese in the communist country, according to the report.

The last publicly televised images of Castro date to May 21, when he met at his home with Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic.

Several days before, local media published images of him meeting French President Francois Hollande.

The one-time revolutionary leader turned power over to his younger brother Raul, 84, in 2008, though he effectively stopped serving in an official capacity in 2006 because of his deteriorating health.



Heavy US-led ISIS raids in Raqa kill dozens

AFP, Beirut

A US-led coalition has carried out some of its heaviest air strikes yet on the Islamic State group's de facto Syrian capital, killing more than 30 people, including six civilians.

The strikes on Saturday night and yesterday morning also damaged infrastructure in Raqa city, the group's bastion in northern Syria.

Elsewhere, regime forces backed by Lebanon's Hezbollah advanced on the last rebel-held town in the Qalamun region by the Lebanese border.

And fighting continued between government troops and two rebel coalitions seeking to capture territory from the regime in northern Aleppo city.

In Raqa, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 30 people had been killed in US-led coalition strikes late Saturday and early yesterday.

The dead included six civilians, among them a child, but the rest were ISIS fighters, the Britain-based monitor said.

The US-led coalition said the strikes were some of its heaviest since it began carrying

out raids against ISIS in Syria last September.

"The significant air strikes tonight were executed to deny Daesh (ISIS) the ability to move military capabilities throughout Syria and into Iraq," spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Gilleran said in a coalition statement.

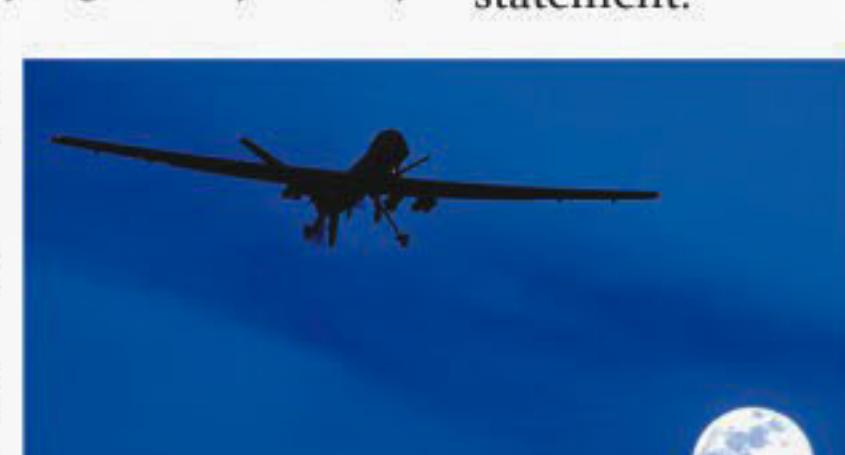
"This was one of the largest deliberate engagements we have conducted to date in Syria and it will have debilitating effects on Daesh's ability to move from Raqa."

Coalition forces "successfully engaged multiple targets" throughout Raqa, the statement said, destroying ISIS structures and transit routes.

The strikes "have severely constricted terrorist freedom of movement," it added.

The raids came after ISIS released a video Saturday showing the execution of 25 Syrian soldiers in the ancient amphitheatre in the city of Palmyra.

The executions had been reported earlier, in the days after ISIS seized the town from government forces on May 21, but the video was the first evidence of the killings.



Mass vaccination call to 'make rabies history'

BBC ONLINE

Greater effort needs to be put into vaccinating dogs against rabies in order to save lives, health experts say.

Up to 60,000 people die from the viral infection each year and it is almost always caught from dog bites.

The Global Alliance for Rabies Control said mass vaccination could "make rabies history".

The organisation HealthforAnimals argued protecting dogs was the most cost-effective way to protect people.

Carel du Marchie Sarvaas, executive director of the global animal medicines association HealthforAnimals, told the BBC: "I don't know if there's a disease which is so easily preventable for so little money that affects so many people."

He said vaccines were cheap and £5 (\$8) could vaccinate 20 dogs for a year.

The global economic cost is estimated to be £80bn (\$124bn).

NEWS IN brief

4 Pak soldiers, 12 militants die in clash

AFP, Peshawar

At least four soldiers and 12 militants were killed in a clash yesterday in Pakistan's troubled tribal belt where the army is fighting a major offensive against Taliban insurgents.

Pakistan's military said the incident took place in the Ghaziza area of Datta Khel town, some 20 kilometres east of Miranshah, the main town in the North Waziristan tribal district which borders Afghanistan.

China factory collapse kills 12

AFP, Beijing

Twelve people died after a shoe factory collapsed in eastern China, state media reported yesterday, with more than 40 escaping on their own or being rescued. More than 50 people were in the four-storey building in the city of Wenling in Zhejiang province when it came down on Saturday afternoon, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

'Dead' Turkish man spends decade to prove he is alive

AFP, Istanbul

A 46-year-old Turkish man mistakenly listed as dead by authorities has spent 10 years fighting to prove he is alive. Sinan Avci, who lives in eastern Erzurum province, was forced into an early retirement in 2003 after being diagnosed with epilepsy. The former worker discovered that Turkey's Social Security Fund had listed him as dead in 2004 when he failed to withdraw his disability pension.

Task force to probe Malaysia PM money trail

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A task force is investigating allegations that a probe into a Malaysian state-controlled investment fund found hundreds of millions of dollars were transferred to the prime minister's personal bank accounts, the attorney general has said. Premier Najib Razak slammed the accusations as "vile" and "malicious" and threatened possible legal action, in his first direct comments since an initial report on the matter by the Wall Street Journal on Friday. Attorney General Abdul Gani Patail said in a statement late yesterday that a multi-agency task force was probing "the allegations linked to the flow of funds into the personal accounts of Prime Minister Najib Razak".