

Bashar, Najjar Confer



Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad (l) talks with Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Mostafa Mohammad Najjar in Damascus on Sunday.

DAMASCUS, Syria, March 11--Defense Minister Brigadier General Mostafa Mohammad Najjar conferred here Sunday with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on issues of mutual interest as well as expansion of ties between the two countries.

Syrian Defense Minister Lieutenant

General Hassan Turkmani, along with Iran's Ambassador to Damascus Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, also attended the meeting, IRNA reported.

The first round of talks between the defense ministers of Iran and Syria opened on Saturday.

The Iranian defense minister met Turkmani at the Syrian Defense

Ministry in Damascus and discussed ways of expanding ties, deepening military and defense cooperation, and accelerating the implementation of agreements.

Najjar arrived in Damascus late on Friday at the head of a military delegation for a three-day visit to Syria upon the official invitation extended by Turkmani.

Defining Moment For Muslim Scholars

TEHRAN, March 11--Fomenting differences among Shiites and Sunnis is an "old rusty weapon" against which Muslim scholars should take decisive measures, a top cleric said on Sunday.

Delivering a speech in an international conference entitled "Scientific Jihad and Islamic Unity: Challenges and Solutions", State Expediency Council Chairman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani called on Muslim scholars to discharge their responsibility against enemies who want to create discord among Shiites and Sunnis, IRNA reported.

"If Muslim scholars do not take action today, they'll have no justification before God," he said, reiterating the need to prevent extremists, either Shiite or Sunni, from undermining the great



Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani

strength of the Muslim world.

The SEC chief noted that a difference of opinion is inevitable according to Islam and "we should tolerate each other and have patience".

Referring to pluralism as one of the significant achievements of human sciences, he urged the nation to avoid unilateralism.

Rafsanjani further said enemies are trying to pressure Iran while they have occupied Iran's neighbors--Iraq and Afghanistan--and created military bases in the north and south of Iran to surround us.

"Americans wish to achieve their goals in the region by creating discord among Shiites and Sunnis," he said.

Sharq Ban Lifted

TEHRAN, March 11--Tehran Press Court lifted the ban on the Persian daily Sharq and sentenced its managing director, Mehdi Rahmani, to a 9-million-rial fine.

Mohammad Reza Saremi of the court's Branch 76 presided over the case on Sunday, ILNA reported.

Rahmani had previously been found guilty of crimes such as publishing materials deemed insulting to religious, political and national figures, and for propagating against state organizations by the Press Jury.

On March 3, IRNA said 14 members of the jury out of 21 voted against Sharq's managing director, Mehdi Rahmani, on four counts.

The Press Supervisory Board had ordered the closure of 'Sharq' last year.

On February 3, Government Employees Administrative Court lifted the ban on the Persian daily Siasat-e Rouz.

The conservative newspaper was temporarily banned by Press Supervisory Board for publishing material deemed insulting to Sunni Muslims, Fars News Agency reported.

Baghdad Confab A Step Forward

BAGHDAD, Iraq, March 11--Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Hassan Kazemi Qomi said on Sunday the Baghdad security conference was an opportunity to voice Iran's all-out support for the Iraqi government.

In an exclusive interview with IRNA, Qomi said political delegations participating in the one-day conference held on Saturday assured the Iraqi government of their support for its political process to establish security. "The turning point of this conference was that a security conference was held in Iraq at the international level after 17 years. This is a success for the legitimate government of Iraq," he said.

Qomi added that due to the significance of this conference, representatives from the United Nations, Organization of Islamic Conference, Arab League and the United Nations Security Council as well as envoys from Bahrain and Egypt attended the conference.

Qomi announced that the next security conference of Iraq's neighbors is scheduled for April, preferably again in Baghdad, at the foreign ministerial level.

Iraq Keen on New...

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For his part, Hashemi regretted that the past intervention of foreign powers resulted in enmity between the two countries.

He conveyed his government's determination to forge mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

The Iraqi vice president hoped that fruitful results will be gained in the interest of the two countries and nations.

Hashemi stressed that as neighboring countries, Iran and Iraq should do their best to benefit from their potentials through cooperation.

Confused

RESALAT: Iran attended the Iraq security conference on Saturday with the declared aim of helping the neighboring country return to normalcy in the security, economic and social spheres. The US delegation comprised of two men, namely the country's ambassador in Baghdad Zalmay Khalilzad, and David Sutterfield, a senior diplomat in the US State Department. The former, who had earlier announced that the Bush regime is ready to hold direct talks with Iran before the important Baghdad conference opened, was looked upon curiously by many participants in the one-day meeting. One of main issues on the mind of the conferees was how envoys from Tehran and Washington would exchange messages about and tackle the issue of direct two-way talks that has been a key subject in the international media for weeks. Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Ali Larjani in a recent visit to South Africa was quoted as saying that any White House request for direct negotiations with the Islamic Republic must be made in an official letter. This is while Washington is thinking of other options. While the Americans insist on maintaining their controversial single-track policy and protect their dwindling prestige, it seems today they need Iran more than anytime in the past. It is not surprising that confusion and desperation is now rampant in Bush's America. Condoleezza Rice, one key figure in the neo-con enclave and the falling superpower top diplomat, for instance, at one time talks about strong desire to engage Tehran in direct talks over all issues of mutual concern, and at another time takes an uncompromising stance against Iran.

Still Not Final!

SARMAYEH: Although a Joint Parliamentary Commission worked hard to announce an acceptable decision about gasoline prices, it failed to do so. What is more surprising is that reports indicate after all the hue and cry nothing is still finalized about petrol prices at the pumps. Some 200 lawmakers this week signed a petition and asked the Majlis Presiding Board to return to the government's plan on gasoline price. Hence, what the lawmakers announce about this highly sensitive issue cannot be considered the final act. Since deciding about fuel price and supply is of great importance and the government has so far not had a clear-cut and transparent stance on the issue, the law-making body has the option to return to the government plan to make it responsible for its action or the lack of it. The government plan calls for deciding the pricing mechanism solely by the cabinet without any outside intervention including by the parliament. For months the plan has been rebuked by many legislators and economic analysts as many opine that the government does not have a strategy on fuel pricing and claim its import program is too expensive imposing extra burden on national coffers already saddled with a variety of subsidies in existence from the 1980-88 war years. Should parliament and the executive branch fail to come up with a sensible and workable formula about gasoline prices, a referendum would seem the last resort. A majority of the lawmakers have reportedly decided not to support the new fiscal budget proposed by the government if the clause on petrol and diesel prices is not revised. The budget bill is in the chamber for weeks and MPs take turns to speak in favor or against the government's multi-billion-dollar spending plan for fiscal 2007-08.

Too Noisy

KAYHAN: The most important question that western powers may be asking themselves is how can Iran be eventually stopped from uranium enrichment. The West simply cannot accept that Iran is making progress in the nuclear domain at such rapid pace. It seems Iran has more self-confidence in the direction it has taken than other countries in the region. By now there is ample reason to believe that international peace and security is closely tied to the stability of the Middle East. By the same token, it is evident that security in the strategic Middle East depends on the will of the Tehran government. Political conditions and what lies ahead in this part of the world in actuality depend on Iran's fate despite the fact that puppet regimes backed by the West are still controlling the region. Iran has emerged as a powerful player in the Middle East and is no longer isolated as is the desire of its sworn enemies and their minions. At the heart of the West's rabid opposition to Iran's nuclear program lies its obvious awareness that Iran's visible achievements in nuclear technology are not something to be ignored. They are also not unaware of the fact that Iran is not trying to make an atomic bomb, but still continue to make loud noises about something that does not exist.

MKO Accused Of Anti-Iraq Crimes

BAGHDAD, Iraq, March 11--Iraq's High Court accused terrorist group Mujahideen Khalq Organization of committing crimes against the Iraqi nation.

Head of the High Court for War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, Jafar Al-Mousavi, told reporters on Sunday that the court's prosecutors have collected concrete proof for putting MKO agents on trial, IRNA reported.

"Written, audio and video evidence pertaining to MKO has been found based on which MKO members are accused of murdering and displacing thousands of Iraqi citizens in the north and south of Iraq," he said.

Al-Mousavi said the team of prosecutors is seeking to file two complaints against MKO in this regard. He did not disclose the time of the trial and the names of suspects. There are close to 4,000 MKO agents held by US forces in Camp Ashraf, Diyala province.

Russian Contractor's Problems Can Be Solved

TEHRAN, March 11--Iran on Sunday expressed its readiness to help the Russian contractor of Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, in southern Iran, increase its liquidity to launch the plant on time.

Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) Gholamreza Aqazadeh, was speaking to reporters on the financial problems of the Russian contractor building Bushehr power plant, IRNA reported.

"The Russian company needs Iran's help with respect to its liquidity problem to launch the Bushehr power plant as scheduled. We are ready to enhance the Russian side's liquidity, although it is not within Iran's legal commitments," he said.

Atomstroiexport is Russia's national agent and general contractor for building the power plant in Bushehr.

"It is necessary for us to hold occasional sessions with Russia before opening the plant. Inauguration of Bushehr power plant is important for Iran. Back-up sectors



Gholamreza Aqazadeh

of the plant, including industrial water and transfer of seawater to a system of water circulation, are currently ready," he said.

The IAEO chief noted that Iran's nuclear case has become a political issue.

Referring to the considerable delays in launching the Bushehr plant, Aqazadeh expressed hope the Russian side would not politicize the issue at a time when talks about anti-Iran resolutions are underway at the UN Security Council.

"The Russian contractor has changed more than eight of its managers so far. It has received payments from Iran which have not been used in the

slated sectors," he said. "Tehran has promptly paid its financial dues. We have even paid our payments ahead of time," he said, pointing out that currently 200 Russian workers are active in the plant.

Asked about the International Atomic Energy Agency's decision to halt its cooperation with Iran in certain areas, the AEOL chief said, "We are not happy with the IAEO decision. Such decisions will undoubtedly affect Iran's cooperation with the agency."

The Iranian official also said cooperation between Iran and the IAEO is continuing on 40 projects, adding that Iran's cooperation with the agency includes technical cooperation over security of Bushehr power plant as well as regional cooperation.

"Based on the recent decision made by the agency, the IAEO has suspended its general and scientific cooperation with Iran which includes participation in scientific conferences of the region," he said.

Ministers Notified

TEHRAN, March 11--Nine parliamentarians from the southern Khuzestan province notified Interior Minister Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi on Sunday over recent riots in the city of Andimeshk.

In a written notification to the minister, the MPs called for forming a special committee to find the root causes of the incident, IRNA reported. Last week, fights between two young men which led to the death of one, causing tribal clashes in the city for several days.

People from both sides were injured in the ethnic conflicts.

Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad Adel read the notification during an open Majlis session.

Also on Sunday, MPs from the northeastern

cities of Birjand and Qaenat, Seyyed Alireza Ebad and Mousa Qorbani respectively, notified Commerce Minister Masoud Mir-Kazemi about the recent illegal hike in bread price in South Khorasan province.

Earlier, a member of Majlis minority faction announced that lawmakers are planning to summon President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Majlis to answer administrative, economic and political questions. Akbar Alami, also a lawmaker from Tabriz in East Azarbaijan province, said the main duty of lawmakers is to supervise the performance of the executive branch and according to Article 122 of the constitution, the chief executive is also accountable to the nation, Majlis and the leader, Mehr News

Agency reported. Lawmakers have stated that they wish to question the president about the rising house prices and inflation rate, incompatibility of monetary decisions with the Fourth Economic

Development Plan (2005-10), adopting diplomacy and making speeches that are not in line with national interests and ignoring the opinion of others, including those of the cabinet.

More Deadly Attacks...

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Iraqi security officials have struggled to protect the annual pilgrimage to mark the end of 40 days mourning for the 7th-century battlefield martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) grandson, Imam Hussein (AS).

Shiites consider him the rightful heir of Islam's leadership, which cemented the rift with Sunni Muslims.

In what appeared to be an attack on the other side of Iraq's sectarian divide

in the northern city of Mosul, a suicide bomber attacked the offices of Iraq's biggest Sunni political party, killing three guards. The attack on the Iraqi Islamic Party's office came as politicians were leaving a reception, said party member Mohammed Shakir Al-Ghanam.

Mosul, about 225 miles northwest of Baghdad, also has seen an increase in suspected Sunni insurgent attacks, including a reported raid on a prison last week that allowed

nearly 150 prisoners to escape. Most were quickly recaptured.

The attacks on the Shiite pilgrims--including a bomb-rigged car and a suicide bomber with an explosives belt packed with metal fragments that together killed five in Baghdad--followed a suicide car bombing on Saturday in Baghdad's main Shiite militia stronghold, Sadr City. The blast at a checkpoint killed 20 people, including at least six Iraqi soldiers.