

Iran: We'd strike back at attacker

Country's leader says warning aimed at United States

By NASSER KARIMI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TEHRAN, Iran

Iran's supreme leader said Thursday that if the United States were to attack Iran, the country would respond by striking U.S. interests all over the world, the latest sharp exchange in an escalating standoff between the two countries.

The comments by Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei came on the same day that another top official, Tehran's ambassador to the United Nations, Javad Zarif, warned in a column in The New York Times that efforts to isolate Iran would backfire on the United States, increasing sectarian tensions in the volatile Middle East, including Iraq.

The United States is reaping "the expected bitter fruits of its ill-conceived adventurism," he said.

The United States and Iran have been in an increasingly tense standoff over Tehran's nuclear program.

The United States has denied it has any plans to strike Iran militarily but has sent an additional aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf in what U.S. officials call an effort to show strength in the face of rising Iranian regional influence.

Speaking to a gathering of air force commanders, Khamenei said: "The enemy knows well that any invasion would be followed by a comprehensive reaction to the invaders and their interests all over the world."

NATO allies resist request to bolster forces in Afghanistan

By LOLITA C. BALDOR
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEVILLE, Spain

Defense Secretary Robert Gates ran into resistance Thursday from NATO allies the United States is pressing to bolster alliance forces in time for a spring offensive in Afghanistan.

Gates, attending his first gathering of NATO defense ministers, said the United States made no additional commitments for more troops of its own. Gates recently extended the tour of a brigade in Afghanistan, where the United States has 27,000 troops, the most since the war began in 2001.

U.S. and NATO military leaders have repeatedly called on alliance members in recent months to send reinforcements and lift restrictions on where their troops can serve. They have met with only limited success.

France and Germany have questioned the wisdom of sending more soldiers, while Spain, Italy and Turkey have also been wary of providing more troops.

"When the Russians were in Afghanistan, they had 100,000 soldiers there and they did not win," German Defense Minister Franz Josef Jung told reporters.

Germany says it will provide six Tornado reconnaissance jets but not significantly augment its 3,000 troops in the north.

After nearly five years at war with the Taliban, this spring will be critical because it could give the people of the country more hope, Gates said.

THE WAR IN IRAQ

Iraqi official tied to militia jailed



A man injured during a U.S. raid Thursday lies in a hospital in Fallujah, Iraq. An airstrike killed 13 insurgents, the U.S. military said.



A man walks amid scattered furniture inside Baghdad's Iraqi Health Ministry offices after a senior ministry official was detained.

Military says deputy health minister detained for corruption

By SAMEER N. YACUB
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

Iraqi forces Thursday detained a senior Health Ministry official accused of corruption and helping to funnel millions of dollars to Shiite militiamen blamed for much of the recent sectarian violence in the capital, the U.S. military said.

The raid was the latest in a crackdown on radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, coming a day after the chief U.S. military spokesman said a security sweep to stop the rampant attacks in the capital was under way.

In Washington, a military official said it was the highest-level arrest so far and provided an example of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's assertion that nobody and no place will be exempt from the crackdown.

Maj. Gen. Abdullah Khamis, the

Iraq army commander for eastern Baghdad, said the arrest of the Health Ministry official was not part of the security operation, which he said would be different from two previous attempts that failed to pacify the capital.

"The elements of the new plan will be completely different in all aspects from the previous plans," he said. "It will be comprehensive ... it will enjoy political support."

West of Baghdad, a U.S. airstrike killed 13 insurgents in a raid on two safe houses where intelligence showed foreign fighters were assembled near Amiriya, the military said.

Five militants were detained and a weapons cache was found in an initial raid on a target near the safe houses.

Police and hospital officials in the area offered a conflicting account, saying the airstrike hit the village of Zaidan south of Abu Ghraib and flattened four houses, killing 45 people, including

women, children and old people.

An Associated Press photo showed the body of a boy in the back of a pickup truck at the nearby Fallujah hospital and people there said he was a victim of the Zaydan airstrike.

Other photos showed several wounded children being treated in the hospital.

Amiriya is in volatile Anbar province, an insurgent stronghold west of Baghdad where hundreds of U.S. troops have been killed.

At least 43 other people were killed or found dead in Iraq. Car bombs struck Shiite targets in Baghdad and south of the capital.

The military also said four U.S. Marines were killed Wednesday in fighting in Anbar province. The deaths raised to at least 3,114 members of the U.S. military who have died since the Iraq war started in March 2003, according to an AP count.

House Democrats set for Iraq vote next week

By ANNE FLAHERTY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

House Democratic leaders said Thursday that members will vote next week on a resolution stating opposition to President Bush's decision to send more forces into combat and voicing support for the troops.

House members initially said members would get a chance to vote on a Republican alternative, but House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer later said he might not allow it because he wanted to keep the debate simple. "We want to ensure that when the House responds, it does so with clarity," he said.

The leaders described the vote as the first step of many that will be taken by Democrats to try to force an end to the nearly four-year-old war that has killed more than 3,000 U.S. troops and

turned public opinion strongly against the conflict.

At a closed-door meeting of Democrats, leaders reassured lawmakers that next week's symbolic vote would not be the last word, participants said. Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., who chairs a subcommittee that oversees defense funding, told members he plans to try limiting funding for the deployment of troops in an upcoming bill paying for the war unless they meet high readiness standards.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., told the caucus the goal was to end the war, as she and other leaders assured the rank and file the nonbinding measure was only the first step.

The House Republican leader, Rep. John Boehner of Ohio, told reporters that the "majority of Republicans support the president and his goal of winning in Iraq."

White House hopes to avert GOP war rebuke

By JULIE H. DAVIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

The White House is attempting an awkward straddle as Congress debates resolutions critical of the Iraq war, determined to avoid a repudiation of President Bush yet reluctant to lobby too aggressively for fear of triggering a Republican backlash.

Bush's "ability to sway votes on issues like this has been severely diminished," says Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and a supporter of the president's troop buildup. "I don't think people are going to cheerlead now."

At least a half-dozen Republican senators appear ready to vote for a nonbinding measure critical of Bush's decision to deploy an additional 21,500 troops. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., said he told the

president after one recent White House meeting that he "didn't see the need for more troops. I raised my concerns, and he listened."

In the House, GOP leaders concede there will be defections next week when a vote is scheduled on a measure expressing disapproval of the troop increase.

It's a sign of the change in relations between congressional Republicans and the administration after nearly four years of war, the deaths of more than 3,000 U.S. military personnel and the midterm elections that gave Democrats control of the House and Senate.

In the past, the White House has been far more public in making its wishes known, as it did aggressively last fall when top officials lobbied hard to resist congressional efforts to impose strict limits on detainee interrogations.

HPV vaccine bill gets push from state legislators

Some senators frustrated over working so hard to promote lifesaving step

By DEANNA MARTIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Senate leaders are pushing for a bill they hope will encourage sixth-grade girls to become vaccinated against a sexually transmitted disease that can cause cervical cancer, legislation they say is a good balance between parental rights and health protection.

The bill as drafted would simply give parents information about the link between human papillomavirus, or HPV, and cervical cancer and would state that an HPV vaccine is available.

Although the legislation does not require the vaccine or even suggest that parents have their daughters vaccinated, lawmakers said they are still trying to combat opposition from those who believe the bill would require the vaccine. Some senators said Thursday they are frustrated that they have to work so hard to promote a step they believe can save lives.

"One of the things that's really getting lost is this: This is a vaccine against cancer," said Sen. Beverly Gard, R-Greenfield. "That is a monumental scientific breakthrough."

Gard said things could be different if there was a vaccine against prostate cancer in men.

"We would not be having this debate," she said.

Bill sponsor Sen. Connie Lawson, R-Danville, said lawmakers are trying to explain exactly what the bill does.

"I think there have been some distractions," she said. One distraction may revolve around the company making the vaccine.

Gardasil, made by Merck & Co. and approved by the federal government in June, protects girls and women against strains of HPV that are responsible for most cases of cervical cancer. A government advisory panel has recommended that all girls get the shots at 11 and 12, before they are likely to be sexually active.

Merck is helping bankroll efforts to pass state laws requiring the vaccines and says its lobbying efforts have been above board.

The company has funneled money through Women in Government, an advocacy group made up of female state legislators around the country, including Lawson.

Some critics have said the relationship between Merck and Women in Government is too cozy.

But Senate President Pro Tem David Long, R-Fort Wayne, said such arguments are an attempt to cloud the issue. He noted that only a few drug companies are capable of manufacturing vaccines on such a large scale.

"It's a vaccine against cancer," he said. "People need to focus on that and not worry about who manufactures it or who provides it. Every vaccine in this country and in the world is produced by a drug company. It's just an attempt to distract the discussion."

Many companies and agencies support Women in Government, Lawson said, including the Indiana State Medical Association and the Indiana Health Care Association.

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