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Weekly Report on Iran
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Political News

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Israel is primed to wage war on Iran, a deputy to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday, in a rare break with his government's reticence as foreign governments try to curb Tehran's nuclear plans. By spearheading assaults on guerrillas in neighboring Lebanon and Palestinian territories, the Israeli air force had gained the techniques necessary for any future strikes on Iranian sites, Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon said.

Iran over decade away from anti-US missile

Iran is unlikely to be able to make a missile capable of hitting the U.S. east coast for more than a decade, according to a study by a London-based thinktank released on Monday. The timing of advances in Iran's long-range missile technology is being closely watched in Washington, which accuses Tehran of pursuing nuclear weapons and is pushing for a new round of sanctions.

MP Says Iran Ready to Negotiate on Fuel Swap

Iran is still ready for negotiations over the supply of the nuclear fuel for its Tehran research reactor, a senior legislator says. Although Iran has managed to enrich (uranium) to the purity level of 20% and has begun producing fuel plates for its research reactor, "doors are still open for negotiations over the supply of fuel for the plant," Head of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Alaeddin Boroujerdi told reporters.

MP Highlights Iran's "Undeniable Role" in Eurasia

Parliament member Mehdi Sanaei has stressed the country's major role in the Eurasia region, underlining that Iran's role cannot be denied given its special position in Eurasia. Undoubtedly, Iran is a major regional power and plays a key role in Eurasia, Sanaei, who is a member of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, said at a round table on 'Iran's role in Eurasia's geopolitics and geo-economy' held at Eurasia Research Center (IRAS) here in Tehran yesterday.

MP: Iran Has Never Opposed Talks with P5+1

Iran has never opposed holding talks with P5+1 group, said Head of the Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Alaeddin Boroujerdi yesterday.

"P5+1 has been long asking to hold talks with Iran over nuclear issue and expressed interest in continuing the negotiations, Iran has never disagreed with talks," Boroujerdi told reporters.

Iran's "Able to Sink U.S. Military Ships"

Iran enjoys the military capability to hit and sink U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf, a senior lawmaker says. "The Islamic Iran has the ability to sink the United States' warships in the Persian Gulf and this will be an easy task, considering Iran's advanced military weapons," member of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Seyed Ahmad Avaei told FNA.

Iran, India Study New Round of Bilateral Ties

Secretary of Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili says Iran and India must upgrade the level of security in the region. In his meeting with Indian Deputy National Security Adviser Alok Prasad, the two sides underlined expansion of bilateral ties and new a round of cooperation between the two countries.

EU Seeks Direct Talks With Iran Over Nuclear Issue

EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton is seeking direct talks with Iran over its nuclear program, and the prospects are looking favorable, officials said Monday. Ashton, who held talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in Brussels Monday, is asking Ankara to contact the Iranian authorities and try to organize talks on behalf of the six world powers involved in efforts to persuade Tehran to give up its nuclear program, a spokesman said.

ABN Amro Admits to Violating Sanctions

The former ABN Amro, now part of Royal Bank of Scotland, yesterday agreed to pay \$500m (£337m) in fines as part of a settlement with the Department of Justice and admitted that it willfully and systematically violated U.S. sanctions against Iran, Libya, the Sudan and Cuba.

Ecuador Dollar Use Not Threatened by Iran

Ecuador's relationship with Iran doesn't threaten the country's use of the dollar as its official currency, Central Bank President Diego Borja said. Borja, speaking to reporters today in Quito, said he met with representatives of the U.S. Treasury Department, Federal Reserve and International Monetary Fund last month to dispel concerns about Ecuador's relationship with Iran. Borja was confirmed as central bank president April 5 after serving as interim chief since December.

FM Spokesman Stresses New Formula for Nuclear Fuel Swap

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast said yesterday that new formula can pave the way for the nuclear fuel swap with Turkey and Brazil. Talking to reporters, he expressed hope that U.S., France and Russia would announce their readiness for fuel swap and prove that they are serious in that regard.

Eight Presidents to Attend G-15 Summit

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast said yesterday that eight presidents have so far announced their readiness to attend the upcoming G-15 Summit. He added that other G-15 member countries will be represented at the meeting with their vice-presidents, deputy prime ministers or foreign ministers.

President's Presence at NPT Meeting Against West's Predictions

A senior nuclear official says presence of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the newly-ended NPT meeting has disrupted West's predictions about outcome of the gathering. Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Ali-Akbar Salehi made the remarks while commenting on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's participation at the opening session of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference which started at the United Nations headquarters in New York on May 3.

Obama Adviser Warns Russia Against Arms Sale to Iran

The United States has made it clear to Russia that delivering an anti-aircraft system to Iran would have severe consequences for U.S. ties with Moscow, a senior advisor to President Obama said Tuesday. In a generally upbeat assessment of ties with Russia, Gary Samore, White House coordinator for arms control, weapons of mass destruction proliferation and terrorism, said he thought Russia understood Washington's position and would be surprised if Moscow shipped the S-300 anti-aircraft system that Iran has ordered.

Iran Seeks Closer Military Ties With Tajikistan

Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi was to arrive here yesterday on an official visit aimed at expanding military contacts between the two countries. The agenda of the visit includes talks with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, Defense Minister Sherali Khairullayev and other state officials on issues related to the bilateral military cooperation.

MP: Iran Can Not Be Isolated in Int'l Scene

Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Rapporteur Kazem Jalali said Iran cannot be isolated in the international scene.

Referring to the upcoming G15 summit in Tehran Monday, he said, “the fact that several presidents will attend the international summit in capital Tehran, shows that the policy of isolating Iran taken by the US and has been stepped up over recent years has failed to succeed and basically, Iran cannot be isolated.”

Envoy: Iran Ready to Aid Iraq with Reconstruction

Iran is prepared to cooperate in the reconstruction of Iraq, Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Hassan Kazzemi Qomi reiterated yesterday. "Iran is ready to cooperate in the reconstruction of Iraq, especially the Kurdistan region, and holding different exhibitions to develop economic and trade relations and identifying grounds for investment are means to this aim," Kazzemi Qomi said, visiting Iran's fifth exhibition in Iraq's northern city province of Erbil.

Pakistani Envoy Discharged From Hospital

Pakistani Ambassador Mohammad Bakhsh Abbasi was discharged from hospital yesterday after receiving medical treatment for slight injury he suffered in an attack. Abbasi was admitted to the hospital in Tehran immediately after he was attacked by an Afghan national and slightly injured on Tuesday.

Iran Urges Implementation of NPT's Article 4

Iran's envoy to the third committee of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in New York called for the implementation of Article four of the treaty which stresses indiscriminate research, production and use of nuclear energy for all countries.

Economic News

US businesses fault rush to sanctions on Iran

The US Congress is moving forward with a bill to sanction companies that do business in Iran, despite the White House's efforts to build international support for United Nations sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Gold Imports Up 420% Last Year

Iran's gold imports increased 420 percent and silver imports have been decreased by 90 percent during the last Iranian year (March 2009 – March 2010). In 2009, Iran imported 640kg of silver worth \$0.32 million which shows a decrease of 90 percent compared to the previous year (2008).

Expo 2010 an Opportunity for Expansion of Iran-China Ties

The Expo 2010 in Shanghai should be viewed as a historical and trade opportunity for the further development of economic relations between Tehran and Beijing, an Iranian official said yesterday. "Although Iran's presence at Shanghai's exhibition has experienced many ups and downs, it is believed that the six-month-long exhibition will provide a proper opportunity for the Iranian businessmen to make the best use of this great international event," Deputy Commerce Minister Babak Afghahi said.

Iran Imports 1.3m Tons Rice in 2009

Iran's total import of rice during the last Iranian year (March 2009 – March 2010) has increased 34 percent compared to the previous year. Iran in 2009 imported, 287 tons of rice worth \$1,071 million which shows a decrease of 7 percent in total mass but increase of 34 percent in total value.

Iran Offers Pakistan Crude Oil On Deferred Payment

Pakistan government has receive an offer from Iran for the provision of crude oil on deferred payment. The offer also states that Iran will facilitate Pakistan till the completion of gas pipe line. Iran is offering Pakistan to overcome its energy crises.

Iran, 3rd Crude Oil Exporter to Taiwan

Iran has exported 2.38 million barrels of crude oil to Taiwan in March 2010, Taiwan's Bureau of Energy for Ministry of Economic Affairs reported. Iran has been ranked third greatest crude exporter to Taiwan in March 2010, exporting 2.38 million barrels of oil, the report said.

Iran Keen to Expand Trade Ties with Portugal

A senior trade official has voiced Tehran's willingness to expand trade exchanges with Portugal. "We are eager to establish trade ties with independent and powerful states like Portugal and we help establish such good relations between the two countries," Deputy Commerce Minister Babak Afqahi said in a meeting with head of north Portugal's chamber of commerce here in Tehran today.

Minister Carrying Ahmadinejad's Message to Qatari Emir

Commerce Minister Mehdi Ghazanfari says he will submit President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's invitation to the Qatari emir. "President Ahmadinejad in his message has invited the emir of Qatar to attend the G15 Summit in Tehran on May 17," Ghazanfari told IRNA upon arrival in Doha, Qatar yesterday.

Nigeria, Iran Strengthen Energy, Trade Ties

With the possibility of nuclear co-operation for peaceful purposes becoming more and more inevitable by the day, Nigeria and Iran at the weekend stepped up their planned collaboration in the field of energy investment and trade.

Iran Gives Two Week Ultimatum to Shell, Repsol

Iran has given a two week ultimatum to energy giants Shell and Repsol to decide on their investments in key gas projects or else they would be replaced by local firms, a top official said on Monday.

Social News

Iran hangs 5 Kurdish activists, including woman

Tehran, May 09 - Five Kurdish activists, including a woman, were hanged on Sunday in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. The Tehran public prosecutor's office in a statement said Shirin Alam-Houli, Ali Heydarian, Mahdi Islamian, Farzad Kamangar, and Farhad Vakili were hanged at dawn.

Iran bans dissident clerics' writings at Book Fair

Authorities have removed books written by two senior dissident ayatollahs at the Tehran International Book Fair. Officials say some 200,000 books have been put on display for the 10-day event, which opened to the public Wednesday at the Imam Khomeini Mosalla (Prayer Hall). But the works of Grand Ayatollah Yousef Sanei were removed from stalls on the opening day.

Museum of Contemporary Art Invited to Venice Biennale of Architecture

Roberto Rosolen, an official of the 12th Venice Biennale of Architecture met with Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMCA) Director Mahmud Shaluyi and invited representatives of the museum to attend the biennale this year. They both met at the headquarters of the biennial in Venice where Rosolen officially invited TMCA for the biennial running from August 29 to November 21.

Symposium on Caspian Climate Change Opens in Sari

The second International Symposium on Climate Change and Dendrochronology in Caspian Ecosystems opened in Research Institute and Faculty of Natural Resources of Sari University, Mazandaran province yesterday. Over 420 Iranian and foreign experts from home and abroad are taking part in the three-day event.

Political News

Israel primed for war on Iran: deputy PM

Israel is primed to wage war on Iran, a deputy to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday, in a rare break with his government's reticence as foreign governments try to curb Tehran's nuclear plans.

By spearheading assaults on guerrillas in neighboring Lebanon and Palestinian territories, the Israeli air force had gained the techniques necessary for any future strikes on Iranian sites, Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon said.

"There is no doubt that the technological capabilities, which improved in recent years, have improved range and aerial refueling capabilities, and have brought about a massive improvement in the accuracy of ordnance and intelligence," he told a gathering of military brass and experts near Tel Aviv. " This capability can be used for a war on terror in Gaza, for a war in the face of rockets from Lebanon, for war on the conventional Syrian army, and also for war on a peripheral state like Iran "

Israeli deputy PM Moshe Yaalon

"This capability can be used for a war on terror in Gaza, for a war in the face of rockets from Lebanon, for war on the conventional Syrian army, and also for war on a peripheral state like Iran," said Yaalon, a former armed forces chief.

Israel, which is assumed to have the Middle East's only atomic arsenal, bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981 and launched a similar sortie in Syria in 2007.

But its veiled threats against foe Iran have been questioned by some independent analysts who see the potential targets as too distant, dispersed, numerous and well-defended for Israeli warplanes to take on alone.

Israel's leaders rarely use the term "war" while publicly discussing how to deal with Iran, in whose often secretive uranium enrichment, long-range missile projects and hostile rhetoric the Jewish state sees a mortal threat.

Iran over decade away from anti-US missile

Iran is unlikely to be able to make a missile capable of hitting the U.S. east coast for more than a decade, according to a study by a London-based thinktank released on Monday.

The timing of advances in Iran's long-range missile technology is being closely watched in Washington, which accuses Tehran of pursuing nuclear weapons and is pushing for a new round of sanctions.

Iran denies the charges and says its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes.

The report by International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said Iran's missile development programme appeared connected to its push to expand its nuclear capabilities, "with the aim of giving Iran the capability to deliver nuclear warheads beyond its borders".

But IISS said it expected Iran would seek to master intermediate range missiles — between 3,500 and 5,500 km (2,187 to 3,437 miles) — before it attempted to build intercontinental (ICBM) missiles, which have a range above 5,500 km.

"Logic and the history of Iran's revolutionary missile and space launcher development efforts suggest Tehran would develop and field an intermediate range missile before embarking on a programme to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the American East coast, 9,000 km away," it said.

"It is thus reasonable to conclude that a notional Iranian ICBM, based on No-Dong and Scud technologies, is more than a decade away from development," it added, referring to missiles developed by the former Soviet Union and later North Korea.

The IISS report appeared in line with a May 2009 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate that deemed Tehran unlikely to have a long-range missile until between 2015 and 2020, according to U.S. officials who saw the report at the time. The 2009 estimate was revised from an earlier range of 2012 to 2015.

However on April 19 this year, an unclassified Defense Department report on Iran's military said that with sufficient foreign assistance, Iran may be able to build a missile capable of striking the United States by 2015.

Turning to a potential Iranian missile threat to Europe, the IISS report, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Capabilities", said that Iran was not likely to field a liquid-fuelled missile capable of targeting Western Europe before 2014 or 2015.

And a version of its solid-fuelled Sejil missile capable of delivering a one tonne warhead at a range of 3,700 km was at least four or five years away from deployment, it said.

Experts say solid-fuelled missiles are of particular concern because they take a much shorter time to prepare for launch than liquid-fuelled weapons and so are harder to pre-empt.

The report said the Sejil represented the most significant advance in Iranian missile capacities to date.

But it said the Sejil-2, successfully flight-tested for the first time in Nov. 2008, was still two to three years of flight testing away from becoming an operational system.

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The military utility of Iran's existing ballistic missiles was severely limited because of their very poor accuracy, although it said the missiles could be used as a political weapon against adversary cities

MP Says Iran Ready to Negotiate on Fuel Swap

Iran is still ready for negotiations over the supply of the nuclear fuel for its Tehran research reactor, a senior legislator says.

Although Iran has managed to enrich (uranium) to the purity level of 20% and has begun producing fuel plates for its research reactor, "doors are still open for negotiations over the supply of fuel for the plant," Head of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Alaeddin Boroujerdi told reporters.

After the West refrained from responding to Iran's request to supply fuel for its research reactor, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ordered the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to provide and install the necessary equipments to start enriching uranium to the purity level of 20% to feed the reactor.

The country on February 2 started injecting gas into a cascade of centrifuges to enrich uranium to the purity level of 20%, all under the supervision of the IAEA inspectors.

Noting that other countries should accept Iran's right to use enriched uranium to fuel its research reactor for producing radioisotopes for more than 800,000 patients, Boroujerdi reiterated that the Islamic Republic is ready to take confidence-building measures in this regard.

"Accordingly, we have welcomed the fuel swap although negotiations are required for the conditions of such a swap," he added.

MP Highlights Iran's "Undeniable Role" in Eurasia

Parliament member Mehdi Sanaei has stressed the country's major role in the Eurasia region, underlining that Iran's role cannot be denied given its special position in Eurasia.

Undoubtedly, Iran is a major regional power and plays a key role in Eurasia, Sanaei, who is a member of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, said at a round table on 'Iran's role in Eurasia's geopolitics and geo-economy' held at Eurasia Research Center (IRAS) here in Tehran yesterday.

He underlined that Iran's strategic role in the Eurasia region needs activation of cultural, historical, communication potentials and huge investments in the oil and gas sectors as well as an increase in exchanges with the Eurasian states.

Sanaei cited Iran's geopolitical and geo-economic situation, religious ideology and energy as the three main factors contributing to Tehran's influence in area of foreign policy affairs.

The lawmaker also underlined Iran's strategic role among the countries of the South, and pointed out that Iran is the main center and cause for the formation of a majority of regional alliances among the countries of North.

Thus, Iran should enjoy a more influential role in dealing with foreign policy affairs in the North, he said, and added, "A large number of our country's potentials should be activated in a bid to increase Iran's influence and turn it into a strategic actor in the North.

MP: Iran Has Never Opposed Talks with P5+1

Iran has never opposed holding talks with P5+1 group, said Head of the Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Alaeddin Boroujerdi yesterday.

"P5+1 has been long asking to hold talks with Iran over nuclear issue and expressed interest in continuing the negotiations, Iran has never disagreed with talks," Boroujerdi told reporters.

He added Iran's nuclear activities are very obvious to P5+1 and everybody knows that the era of banning a country from uranium enrichment has come to an end.

"P5+1 request for talks on nuclear fuel exchange illustrates that it has not only accepted Iran's uranium enrichment, but also is ready to exchange 3.5 percent enriched uranium for twenty percent enriched one," said the official.

Referring to Tehran reactor's use for eight hundred thousands patients, he added, "Given the importance of the issue, we started production of twenty percent enriched uranium, but Iran's doors are still open for holding talks on Tehran's reactor fuel."

He described any threat against Iran as inefficient and said the country abides by logic, NPT and international commitments and never yields to threat.

He then continued, "It is time for P5+1 to change its idea on reviewing the Security Council's resolutions and to alter its policies, the decisions should be in accordance with realities.

Iran's "Able to Sink U.S. Military Ships"

Iran enjoys the military capability to hit and sink U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf, a senior lawmaker says.

"The Islamic Iran has the ability to sink the United States' warships in the Persian Gulf and this will be an easy task, considering Iran's advanced military weapons," member of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Seyed Ahmad Avaei told FNA.

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He reminded Iran's jump in manufacturing defensive and offensive weapons and military equipment during the last three decades, and said, "The Islamic Iran has made much effort and achieved many successes in weapons and military research and the U.S. would not put silly moves against Iran on its working agenda."

"The Islamic Iran has made much progress in military fields and is capable of repairing and restoring itself in a matter of no time, which is considered as among Iran's strong points," Avaei went on saying.

He also underscored the Iranian forces' preparedness to defend the country's borders, and stated, "The Islamic Iran will not forgive any potential attack by the enemies and it will utilize all its power and capabilities to defend its Islamic soil."

The lawmaker also stressed Iran's regional clout, and said, "The Islamic Iran has become a regional superpower and this has turned into a source of fear and fright for certain world powers."

Iran, India Study New Round of Bilateral Ties

Secretary of Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili says Iran and India must upgrade the level of security in the region.

In his meeting with Indian Deputy National Security Adviser Alok Prasad, the two sides underlined expansion of bilateral ties and new a round of cooperation between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Prasad pointed to his talks in Tehran and termed it beneficial for expansion of the level of the two countries' transactions.

He stressed India's readiness for playing a vital role in expansion of stability in the region and said that expansion of political and economic ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran was the first priority for India.

Jalili in turn called for creating a new definition for the two countries' transactions.

The Secretary of Supreme National Security Council pointed to the historical relations between Iran and India and called for expansion of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

EU Seeks Direct Talks With Iran Over Nuclear Issue

EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton is seeking direct talks with Iran over its nuclear program, and the prospects are looking favorable, officials said Monday.

Ashton, who held talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in Brussels Monday, is asking Ankara to contact the Iranian authorities and try to organize talks on

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behalf of the six world powers involved in efforts to persuade Tehran to give up its nuclear program, a spokesman said.

Davutoglu has suggested talks between Ashton, as a representative of the so-called P5+1 group, and Iran's top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili.

Ashton would hold negotiations with Tehran on behalf of the P5+1 group, which consists of permanent UN Security Council members Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States, plus Germany.

Ashton already has Washington's blessing for such talks.

Speaking on the sidelines of an EU foreign ministers' meeting, Ashton said she was prepared to talk with Iran's leaders, but only about the nuclear issue.

"If Iran wishes to contact me directly to propose that we have real discussions on the issue of nuclear weapons capability, I'd be pleased to discuss that" with the six powers involved in negotiating with Iran.

That topic would have to be "the specific and only subject" of any such talks, British peer Ashton insisted.

And she added during a meeting with EU foreign ministers in Brussels that she expected the United Nations Security Council to bring the matter to "some kind of resolution over... the next four to six weeks."

Davutoglu, at a later press conference, said he had held telephone talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki on the subject.

ABN Amro Admits to Violating Sanctions

The former ABN Amro, now part of Royal Bank of Scotland, yesterday agreed to pay \$500m (£337m) in fines as part of a settlement with the Department of Justice and admitted that it willfully and systematically violated U.S. sanctions against Iran, Libya, the Sudan and Cuba.

The settlement marks the latest in a series of big penalties brought by U.S. prosecutors in connection to money laundering violations.

The DoJ said financial institutions, including Credit Suisse and Wachovia, had paid \$1.2bn over the past five months for not having adequate programs in place to comply with U.S. sanctions and other banking policies.

ABN admitted under the terms of a deferred prosecution agreement with the DoJ that from 1995 to 2005 certain offices and subsidiaries of the bank intentionally flagged dollar

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transactions from sanctioned countries so that it could "amend" the payments and process them in a way that circumvented U.S. controls.

The bank improved its internal controls after 2005, but the DoJ said even after it took action additional transactions with sanctioned countries occurred as late as 2007.

The DoJ said that ABN and the sanctioned parties knew full well that if documentation of payments were left unaltered, the transactions would automatically be discovered by other U.S. banks, which would have reported the payments to U.S. Treasury officials.

By removing relevant information, the DoJ said, hundreds of millions of dollars were able to move through the U.S. financial system to sanctioned countries undetected.

RBS yesterday said that ABN had a \$500m provision in place to cover the cost of the probe. It said the conduct described in the criminal information reflected a "regrettable period" for ABN and that it was pleased to have resolved the matter.

Under the terms of a deferred prosecution agreement with the DoJ, the bank admitted that it failed to maintain an adequate anti-money laundering program in its New York office.

According to court documents, more than \$3.2bn involving shell companies and other high-risk transactions with foreign financial institutions flowed through the NY branch from 1998 to December 2005.

Ecuador Dollar Use Not Threatened by Iran

Ecuador's relationship with Iran doesn't threaten the country's use of the dollar as its official currency, Central Bank President Diego Borja said.

Borja, speaking to reporters today in Quito, said he met with representatives of the U.S. Treasury Department, Federal Reserve and International Monetary Fund last month to dispel concerns about Ecuador's relationship with Iran. Borja was confirmed as central bank president April 5 after serving as interim chief since December.

Ecuador's central bank, which was stripped of its autonomy in a constitutional referendum in 2008, signed an accord with Iran in December 2008 to increase trade. Iran agreed to give Ecuador \$40 million in credit for small- and medium-sized businesses, according to a March 2009 statement on the website of President Rafael Correa. Borja said today Iran never deposited any funds with the Ecuadorean bank.

"It was perfectly clear to the U.S. Treasury that there was no deposit from Iran and therefore there is no underlying problem" that would affect "the normal flow of dollars to the economy," Borja said.

Borja said some Ecuadorean companies have been affected by the country's presence on the Financial Action Task Force money-laundering list. Ecuador was put on the list in February and seeks to be removed, he said.

FM Spokesman Stresses New Formula for Nuclear Fuel Swap

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast said yesterday that new formula can pave the way for the nuclear fuel swap with Turkey and Brazil.

Talking to reporters, he expressed hope that U.S., France and Russia would announce their readiness for fuel swap and prove that they are serious in that regard.

Iran believes that the new Turkey-Brazil formula can be materialized, he said.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan will be in Iran at the same time as the Brazilian President Lula da Silva who is due to make an official visit to Tehran from May 16 to 17, the spokesman announced.

On the upcoming meeting of Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili with the EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton, he said, Ms Ashton had repeatedly requested a meeting with Iranian officials.

Iran agreed to the issue but the date has not been set yet, he said, adding that as to the venue of the meeting, Turkey suggested that the talks be held there and Tehran did not see a problem with that.

"We should wait and see what issues she wants to discuss", he said.

If Iran's peaceful nuclear program is the topic of Jalili-Ashton discussions, "our response is that the nuclear issue is a matter of discussion with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)," Mehman-Parast said, adding that but if she wants to bring up international issues, Tehran will examine them.

He also said that in order to have an objective guarantee the fuel swap should take place in the Iranian territory.

He added that Iran believes that the objective guarantee will only be achieved through fuel swap within the Iranian lands.

Expressing his regret over the recent explosions in Iraq, he said that certain countries which are opposed to formation of a popular government in that country try to create tension and unrest in the neighboring Iraq.

Asked about the recent threatening remarks of the Zionist officials against the Islamic Republic, he said such allegations have no value and base. The Zionist regime is in a

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situation that has no ability to attack the smallest resistance movement group in the region, he reiterated.

Such remarks by different Zionist officials are to calm down their tense and critical domestic situation, Mehman-Parast noted.

Asked about claims of Kuwaiti officials regarding Iran's alleged espionage in that Arab state, the spokesman said no Kuwaiti officials has made such an allegation against Tehran.

Certain Kuwaiti media and members of Parliament have made anti-Iran remarks which were by no means true and were faced with negative reactions of senior Kuwaiti officials, he added.

By masterminding such moves, the Zionist regime is trying to disrupt the establishment of cooperation among regional states, he said, adding that they are well aware that the regional convergence would be harmful to them.

Referring to the release of Majid Kakavand, the Iranian national imprisoned in France, he appreciated efforts made by the French judicial system to free him.

He blamed the U.S. conspiracies for his arrest, saying if Kakavand decides to lodge a complaint against Washington, his ministry would support the move.

On destruction of Fatemeh Zahra Mosque in Azerbaijan, the spokesman said it is an internal issue that relates to Baku.

"Meanwhile, we expect the Azeri government to take due measures in order not to hurt the Muslims' feelings", Mehman-Parast noted.

About the baseless claims on the three Iranian islands and forging a false name for Persian Gulf, the Iranian spokesman said "the issue comes from certain countries which their failure in the Middle East region has made them angry about Iran."

Asked about receiving World War II damages, Mehman-Parast answered the Islamic Republic of Iran is following up the issue.

On the issue of the French national Clotilde Reiss arrested in Iran during the post-election unrest, the Foreign Ministry spokesman said the case is following its legal procedure.

Eight Presidents to Attend G-15 Summit

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast said yesterday that eight presidents have so far announced their readiness to attend the upcoming G-15 Summit.

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He added that other G-15 member countries will be represented at the meeting with their vice-presidents, deputy prime ministers or foreign ministers.

Economic cooperation among the member states and seeking new capacities for cooperation in the three regions of Latin America, Asia and Africa will top the agenda of the G-15 meeting.

The event will prepare an appropriate ground for bilateral and multilateral negotiations, Mehman-Parast reiterated.

Tehran is to host the G-15 summit on May 17 and the foreign ministers meeting is to be held on May 15.

Along with member states of G-15, leaders of other countries will attend the G15 Summit as special guests.

Iran is the current chairman of the G-15.

G 15 was established 20 years ago with two major goals of strengthening South-South cooperation and facilitating dialogue between South and North.

Influential and important developing countries like Brazil, Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Malaysia and Indonesia are among members of the G-15.

President's Presence at NPT Meeting Against West's Predictions

A senior nuclear official says presence of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the newly-ended NPT meeting has disrupted West's predictions about outcome of the gathering.

Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Ali-Akbar Salehi made the remarks while commenting on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's participation at the opening session of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference which started at the United Nations headquarters in New York on May 3.

The president suggested 11 proposals for disarmament and non-proliferation of the nuclear weapons worldwide.

"The U.S. and other Western states intended to control the conference and only focus on the issue of non-proliferation rather than disarming of nuclear weapons states," Salehi told IRNA.

He added that the U.S. officials were to add more conditions for making peaceful use of nuclear energy by non-nuclear-states.

However, he noted that President Ahmadinejad's speech and his proposals have put the Americans in a "defensive position" and that was even felt in the speech of U.S.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who was clearly angry with President Ahmadinejad's proposals to the NPT review conference

Iran-China Ties "Strategic"

Members of Iran-China friendship group called the two countries' parliamentary relations as "strategic".

In a meeting with members of China National People's Congress, Hossein Sobhani-Nia, deputy chairman of the Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission said, "After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran and China have witnessed steady growth."

Appreciating logical stances adopted by China towards international and regional issues including Iran's nuclear program, he said the Iranian parliament wishes to have strong relations with China in all fields especially in parliamentary ties.

Deputy of Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress of China, Nien Chen Chung, for his part described Iran as an important country which affects regional and international developments

Obama Adviser Warns Russia Against Arms Sale to Iran

The United States has made it clear to Russia that delivering an anti-aircraft system to Iran would have severe consequences for U.S. ties with Moscow, a senior advisor to President Obama said Tuesday.

In a generally upbeat assessment of ties with Russia, Gary Samore, White House coordinator for arms control, weapons of mass destruction proliferation and terrorism, said he thought Russia understood Washington's position and would be surprised if Moscow shipped the S-300 anti-aircraft system that Iran has ordered.

"We've made it very clear to the Russians that that would have a very significant impact on our bilateral relations," said Samore. "I think the Russians understand that the consequences would be very severe."

Tehran has urged Russia not to bow to Western pressure over the sale of the system which, analysts say, could help Iran thwart any attempt to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities.

The United States and Israel have refused to rule out military action against Iran if diplomacy fails to resolve the dispute over its nuclear facilities. Tehran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, but Western governments believe it is aimed at bomb-making.

Washington is pressing other global powers to agree to a fourth round of U.N. sanctions against Tehran over its refusal to halt its nuclear work, but Samore said Iran's program had suffered technical setbacks, giving diplomacy a bit more time.

"The nuclear clock is not moving as quickly as some feared," he said.

Samore defended the Obama administration's decision this week to revive an agreement with Russia in which the two countries would cooperate on civilian nuclear energy, saying the Russians had been more cooperative on issues ranging from dealing with Iran to reducing nuclear arms.

But he stopped short of saying that the proposed nuclear deal would be withdrawn if the Russians sent the anti-aircraft system to Iran, or backed away from supporting a new resolution on U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran.

Iran Seeks Closer Military Ties With Tajikistan

Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi was to arrive here yesterday on an official visit aimed at expanding military contacts between the two countries.

The agenda of the visit includes talks with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, Defense Minister Sherali Khairullayev and other state officials on issues related to the bilateral military cooperation.

"Military and military-technical cooperation between our defense ministries has been developing since 1997 and it is one of the key areas of brotherly relations between Tajikistan and Iran," a spokesman for the Tajik Defense Ministry said.

During his visit to Tajikistan in January 2010, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for further expansion of cooperation between the two countries saying that "under the current global circumstances, countries like Iran and Tajikistan should side with each other more than before."

However, military agreements with Russia currently bind Tajikistan, preventing the Central Asian country from pursuing greater cooperation with Iran.

Tajikistan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a post-Soviet security bloc comprising Russia and the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

MP: Iran Can Not Be Isolated in Int'l Scene

Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Rapporteur Kazem Jalali said Iran cannot be isolated in the international scene.

Referring to the upcoming G15 summit in Tehran Monday, he said, “the fact that several presidents will attend the international summit in capital Tehran, shows that the policy of isolating Iran taken by the US and has been stepped up over recent years has failed to succeed and basically, Iran cannot be isolated.”

Concerning Brazil and Turkey’s role in nuclear fuel exchange, he said, “Iran hails Brazil and Turkey’s more influential role in regional and international issues, since it prevents unilateralism in the world.”

“Nuclear fuel swap has never been excluded from Islamic Republic of Iran’s agenda. Iran does not want to make issues more complicated in regional and international arena, naturally we are seeking settlement of issues, but through a solution which is fair and based on our national interests,” he told reporters on the sidelines of Parliament’s session yesterday.

Envoy: Iran Ready to Aid Iraq with Reconstruction

Iran is prepared to cooperate in the reconstruction of Iraq, Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Hassan Kazzemi Qomi reiterated yesterday.

"Iran is ready to cooperate in the reconstruction of Iraq, especially the Kurdistan region, and holding different exhibitions to develop economic and trade relations and identifying grounds for investment are means to this aim," Kazzemi Qomi said, visiting Iran's fifth exhibition in Iraq's northern city province of Erbil.

He also announced Iran's plans to hold 20 economic exhibitions in different Iraqi cities in the current (Iranian) year (ending on March 20).

The diplomat further expressed pleasure over the establishment of security and freedom in Iraq, and reiterated that stability of the Kurdistan region will help establish stability in Iraq and the regional countries.

Elsewhere, the envoy referred to the cultural commonalities of Iran's West Azarbaijan province in northwest of the country and the Iraqi Kurdistan region which share joint borders, and underlined that all-out support for the expansion of relations between the two bordering regions would pave the way for the development of the region.

Pakistani Envoy Discharged From Hospital

Pakistani Ambassador Mohammad Bakhsh Abbasi was discharged from hospital yesterday after receiving medical treatment for slight injury he suffered in an attack.

Abbasi was admitted to the hospital in Tehran immediately after he was attacked by an Afghan national and slightly injured on Tuesday.

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Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mihman-Parast on Tuesday confirmed the attack, expressing disgust at the incident.

He said the ambassador is in good condition now.

The spokesman said the attack occurred when the ambassador was on walk in a street in northern Tehran.

According to the embassy officials, the ambassador is now resting at home.

The ambassador on his way to the gym was attacked by a young man which is said to have Afghan nationality.

No further details were announced by the officials

Iran Urges Implementation of NPT's Article 4

Iran's envoy to the third committee of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in New York called for the implementation of Article four of the treaty which stresses indiscriminate research, production and use of nuclear energy for all countries.

"The inalienable right of all member countries is one of the main principles of the NPT," the Iranian representative said at the meeting.

He pointed out that scientific and technical achievements are common heritage of all human beings, and reminded that the rights and undertakings of the NPT member states should stand in balance.

The representative stressed that Article four of the NPT is important for the growing use of the nuclear technology in different arenas, including health, medicine, industry, agriculture, environment and sustainable development, especially in the developing countries.

He also underlined that the Islamic Republic of Iran takes the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) responsible for the development and expansion of the peaceful uses of the nuclear technology.

Article four of the NPT suggests that the "Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with articles I and II of the Treaty".

"All the Parties to the Treaty undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Parties to the Treaty in a position to do so shall also cooperate in contributing alone or together with other States or

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international organizations to the further development of the applications of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, especially in the territories of non-nuclear-weapon States Party to the Treaty, with due consideration for the needs of the developing areas of the world," it adds

Economic News

US businesses fault rush to sanctions on Iran

The US Congress is moving forward with a bill to sanction companies that do business in Iran, despite the White House's efforts to build international support for United Nations sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

US business organizations and a number of experts in Washington have expressed concern about the speed with which the Senate Banking and House Foreign Affairs Committee is working to reconcile the house and senate Iran sanctions bills, and what impact this may have on the Barack Obama administration's efforts to organize multilateral sanctions through the UN or negotiate a diplomatic solution with Tehran.

The administration wants congress to hold off on the Iran

sanctions legislation until a deal is reached at the UN.

News emerged late last week from the UN that an agreement might be reached on sanctions by mid-June, but the senate and house have indicated that they are pushing for a reconciliation of the two bills before the end of May.

"I think it's likely to be around the end of the month or after the Memorial Day recess. All of the statements have indicated action before the recess but I wouldn't be surprised if it goes into June," Jim Fine, legislative secretary for foreign policy at the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), a Quaker lobby group, told Inter Press Service.

"The thing that disturbs me most is that I have seen very little evidence that the US is still working the engagement track. The Iranian counterproposal to the original IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] proposal is worth serious consideration by the US and ought to be, in its main points, accepted by the US," he said.

"The Iranian proposal would let the US and the other members of the UN Security Council and the IAEA realize all the advantages from the nuclear exchange with some small changes in how the low-enriched uranium is stored until the nuclear fuel rods are

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delivered," Fine continued.

Tehran has indicated that it could accept, in large part, the IAEA's proposal for exchanging Iranian low-enriched uranium for foreign made fuel rods, but wants to keep the low-enriched uranium in Iran, under IAEA safeguards, until the fuel rods are delivered.

The US, France and Russia had proposed that Iranian low-enriched uranium be shipped out of Iran immediately and held until the fuel rods are ready.

Some Iran specialists fault the administration for not making more generous offers to Iran during its "engagement" phase last year before moving to a containment strategy that includes additional sanctions, as well as other forms of pressure.

In their view, the "pressure track" - whether unilateral or multilateral - will not only prove ineffective, but will also strengthen Tehran's hardliners and ultimately make war more, rather than less, likely.

Cheered on by the so-called "Israel Lobby" centered around the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its Christian Zionist allies, the House of Representatives voted 412-12 last December to approve a far-reaching sanctions bill that, among other measures, would penalize foreign companies that export gasoline and other refined petroleum products to Iran.

The senate followed with an even more sweeping bill aimed at third-country companies the following month. Largely at the administration's behest, however, the Democratic leadership of both the house and the senate held off selecting delegates to a house-senate conference committee charged with reconciling the two bills until last month.

Business leaders have expressed their concern that the rush to penalize companies doing business in Iran could have a negative impact on the US economy and hurt the competitiveness of companies affected by the sanctions.

In a May 6 letter to Senator Chris Dodd and Representative Howard Berman, the US Chamber of Commerce called attention to the business community's concerns with the house and senate versions of the sanctions legislation.

"Most problematic are the specific provisions in both bills that could prohibit any US company from transacting routine business with critical partners from around the globe even if these transactions have no bearing on business with Iran," read the letter.

Particularly of concern to the Chamber of Commerce is the possibility that US firms would be subjected to sanctions which could penalize them for partnering with firms outside the US which do business with Iran.

"In short, these extraterritorial sanctions could deliver significant harm to US companies

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operating globally while doing little or nothing to inconvenience Iran," said the chamber.

It has been a hot-button issue as the White House's calls for a "cooperating country status" in the legislation - a designation that would allow exemptions for companies from partner countries which are working with the US on multilateral sanctions in the UN - was rejected by both Republican and Democratic lawmakers.

Berman, the House Foreign Affairs chair, acknowledged that the White House's suggestion had "a certain logic" but said he was under pressure from his own party and House Republicans.

A May 3 letter by a bipartisan group of 10 senators to Berman and Dodd urged the influential legislators to make sure the final Iran sanctions bill "requires implementation of the strongest possible sanctions".

"Specifically, we would find it difficult to support any conference report that would weaken sanctions by providing exemptions to companies or countries engaged in the refined petroleum trade with Iran," said the letter.

The senators explicitly rejected revisions that "would exempt companies engaged in otherwise sanctionable activities because they are incorporated in so-called 'cooperating countries'."

Some in Washington see the threat of unilateral sanctions as a tool to persuade UN Security Council members to support multilateral sanctions and bring Iran back to the negotiating table.

"It's a double-edged sword. It's quite possible that the threat of unilateral sanctions may help push multilateral sanctions forward, which may help push the Iranians forward. But once you have the fact of unilateral sanctions it cuts in the opposite direction and makes it much harder to do multilateral work or convince the Iranians to move forward," said Fine.

"The threat of unilateral sanctions could conceivably help but the fact of unilateral sanctions will be a serious impediment to any progress.

Gold Imports Up 420% Last Year

Iran's gold imports increased 420 percent and silver imports have been decreased by 90 percent during the last Iranian year (March 2009 – March 2010).

In 2009, Iran imported 640kg of silver worth \$0.32 million which shows a decrease of 90 percent compared to the previous year (2008).

Iran also imported 22,243kg of gold worth \$796 million which shows 392.07 percent increase in total mass, but 422.28 percent of increase in total value compared to the same time period of 2008.

The countries which provided Iran's imported gold were UAE 68 percent, Turkey 27 percent and Russia 4 percent. The countries which provided Iran's silver imports were South Korea 17 percent, Italy 42 percent and China 20 percent.

Expo 2010 an Opportunity for Expansion of Iran-China Ties

The Expo 2010 in Shanghai should be viewed as a historical and trade opportunity for the further development of economic relations between Tehran and Beijing, an Iranian official said yesterday.

"Although Iran's presence at Shanghai's exhibition has experienced many ups and downs, it is believed that the six-month-long exhibition will provide a proper opportunity for the Iranian businessmen to make the best use of this great international event," Deputy Commerce Minister Babak Afghahi said.

Noting that the Iranian Commerce Ministry has granted the trade sector of Iran's pavilion in the Shanghai Expo to the Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce, Afghahi expressed the hope that the chamber would make an optimum use of the opportunity by activating all Iranian commerce chambers and trade unions and formations.

Afghahi, who is a deputy commerce minister for developing Iran's economic relations, pointed out that the Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce has already examined a number of solutions and mechanisms for developing the trade ties between the two countries and is now ready to bring such mechanisms into effect.

Afghahi reiterated that the private sector in Iran can definitely pave the way for a wide stride in trade with China and other countries participating in the exhibition.

The Shanghai Expo 2010 runs from May 1 to Oct 31 promoting the motto 'Better City, Better Life', and Iran is attending the expo displaying a collection of its rich and varied arts.

A collection of 152 Persian paintings, calligraphy with the central theme of Asma-ul-Hosna, a selection of posters focusing on environment and mankind, and photos of the Islamic Revolution have gone on display at the expo.

Land art performances, video art projects, visual art workshops, as well as Pardehkhani (curtain-reading) performances are also arranged during the program.

Iran Imports 1.3m Tons Rice in 2009

Iran's total import of rice during the last Iranian year (March 2009 – March 2010) has increased 34 percent compared to the previous year.

Iran in 2009 imported, 287 tons of rice worth \$1,071 million which shows a decrease of 7 percent in total mass but increase of 34 percent in total value.

The main three countries which provided IRI's imported rice in 2009 were UAE 46 percent, Pakistan 31 percent and India 21 percent

Iran Offers Pakistan Crude Oil On Deferred Payment

Pakistan government has receive an offer from Iran for the provision of crude oil on deferred payment. The offer also states that Iran will facilitate Pakistan till the completion of gas pipe line. Iran is offering Pakistan to overcome its energy crises.

According to information both countries are willing to sign agreement at French Embassy and also signed Guarantee Agreement according to French Laws. The offer made by the Ambassador of Iran to Pakistan, Mashaalah Shakeri during his meeting with Minister of Petroleum and Natural Resources Naveed Qamar. They also discuss other important matters regarding energy. Both countries agreed to cooperate to each other in time of need.

They also discussed the areas of mass cooperation. Pakistani minister said that they want long-standing relationship with Iran. He also added that Gas Pipe line project will strengthen their relationship with each other.

According to sources a delegation of oil and gas experts from Pakistan will soon visit Iran and they will discuss more co-operation opportunities between them. The team is scheduled to visit Iran in July. Naveed Qamar said they will design and form the best team to visit Iran so that it will be fruitful for Pakistan. The team will highlight the core areas of cooperation between Iran and Pakistan.

Iran, 3rd Crude Oil Exporter to Taiwan

TEHRAN (MOJ) - Iran has exported 2.38 million barrels of crude oil to Taiwan in March 2010, Taiwan's Bureau of Energy for Ministry of Economic Affairs reported.

Iran has been ranked third greatest crude exporter to Taiwan in March 2010, exporting 2.38 million barrels of oil, the report said.

According to the report, Taiwan's crude oil imports have increased 15.6 percent in March 2010 compared to the same time in 2009. The report indicated that the Taiwan's import of crude oil was increased 18.1 percent since February 2010.

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The import of crude oil by Taiwan from Saudi Arabia reached 8.6 million barrels equivalent to 33.5 percent of country's total crude oil imports.

After Saudi Arabia, Kuwait with 7.14 million barrels of crude oil exports to Taiwan stands at second position and Iran at third.

Taiwan has also imported 1.93 million barrels of crude oil from Angola, 1.89 million barrels from Oman and 1.86 million barrels from Iraq in March 2010.

Iran Keen to Expand Trade Ties with Portugal

A senior trade official has voiced Tehran's willingness to expand trade exchanges with Portugal.

"We are eager to establish trade ties with independent and powerful states like Portugal and we help establish such good relations between the two countries," Deputy Commerce Minister Babak Afqahi said in a meeting with head of north Portugal's chamber of commerce here in Tehran today.

Afqahi, who is also the Head of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, lamented that current trade exchanges between Tehran and Lisbon do not match the capacities of the two countries.

The official also said that Iran plans to reach agreements with Portugal in a number of fields, including cooperation on standards, investment promotion, avoidance of tax and customs facilities.

He expressed the hope that the two countries would sign the agreements at the earliest.

The official further pointed to \$100 bln worth of trade exchanges between Iran and the other countries, and said that Iran is currently exporting 3,300 products and commodities to other states.

Afqahi stated that considering Portugal's debts to the other countries, Iran's offer for further trade ties with the European country would be much attractive to Lisbon.

Minister Carrying Ahmadinejad's Message to Qatari Emir

Commerce Minister Mehdi Ghazanfari says he will submit President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's invitation to the Qatari emir.

"President Ahmadinejad in his message has invited the emir of Qatar to attend the G15 Summit in Tehran on May 17," Ghazanfari told IRNA upon arrival in Doha, Qatar yesterday.

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G15 was established 20 years ago with two major goals of strengthening South-South cooperation and facilitating dialogue between South and North.

During his two-day stay in Qatar, Ghazanfari is due to inaugurate an exclusive exhibition of the Iranian commodities in that country as from May 13 for four days.

The minister is also to take part in a seminar on investment opportunities in Iran that will be held in a hotel in Doha.

The seminar would review ways to promote Tehran-Doha cooperation and remove the obstacles to this end.

Nigeria, Iran Strengthen Energy, Trade Ties

With the possibility of nuclear co-operation for peaceful purposes becoming more and more inevitable by the day, Nigeria and Iran at the weekend stepped up their planned collaboration in the field of energy investment and trade.

Jointly addressing a media session after their closed-door meeting in Abuja, visiting Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Soleyman Pour and Nigeria's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Idi Hong, also specifically stated that Nigeria and Iran are now looking forward to exploring opportunities for "beneficial nuclear use in the field of medicine and also for energy generation."

The Iranian minister is leading a large trade delegation from its business community in the financial sector and other government agencies. Nigeria and Iran are members of multilateral organizations that include the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), G-15, G-8, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) as well as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Soleyman Pour said: "It is my pleasure to be in Nigeria within this difficult and hard time with the loss of your late President. So, I am here to express my personal condolences ... We are working closely together on vital issues, vital for both sides economically, culturally, politically. We appreciate that there are a variety of rooms for further expansion and enhancement of our relationship. The value of our economies is great both in Iran and Nigeria. We have to find the means to weave this into having a great economy... For Nigeria and Iran to make progress economically, these multilateral mechanism, we must address properly, we should find out our common interest in these areas and also touch upon strategies working together on these issues."

After Nigeria and Iran concluded their joint economic commission last year, the Iranian Ambassador to Nigeria, Khosrow Rezazadeh, told The Guardian: "Now, we are working hard for our President to visit Nigeria. We are in the Middle-East, you are in Africa but we are very close. Culturally, Nigeria and Iran are developing countries. So, unless we share, unless we shake hands, the Super Powers will not give us the technology. Until our revolution (1979), Iran could not make simple drinking glasses. Now for 33 years,

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Nigeria and Iran have had bilateral relations. There is need for us to co-operate in the area of oil and gas. We can share expertise. That's why we are working hard for President Ahmadinejad to visit Nigeria. It will be for the benefit of our two countries"

Fielding questions at the weekend, Hong noted that Nigeria and Iran have come a long way in bilateral relations. His words: "We had a very friendly, working relationship for a very long time and we still maintain it. What this visit has done now is to strengthen the diplomatic relationship and other areas of collaboration...The nuclear issue, Nigeria is an early signatory to the non-proliferation of nuclear materials treaty, we remain strongly committed to that protocol in the NPP treaty. But we are also advocating strongly, nuclear for peaceful purposes like nuclear energy and so on and for that we continue to discuss with countries like Iran because Nigeria is still exploring opportunities for nuclear materials for medicine and also for energy generation."

On the prevailing high level of informal trade between both countries, Hong said: "This is on the table and forms part of the meetings. Currently, the level of trade is not strong enough to the extent that is desirable. We are looking to leveraging on that. We want to scale up that. The meetings are ongoing because as you know, they came with a large delegation to see how things can be scaled up, especially economic relations, between our countries generally."

This now presents a wonderful opportunity for us to scale up co-operation in energy, power and trade. To take up business relations between Iran and Nigeria. As fellow members of OPEC, it is an opportunity for us to scale up investments interest in petroleum, to scale up co-operation in energy and power and also trade. That we would do because we are exploring means of increasing the level of trade between Iran and Nigeria."

Iran Gives Two Week Ultimatum to Shell, Repsol

Iran has given a two week ultimatum to energy giants Shell and Repsol to decide on their investments in key gas projects or else they would be replaced by local firms, a top official said on Monday.

The deadline comes just two days after Iranian Oil Minister Masoud Mirkazemi threatened to kick out foreign firms for delaying the development of its massive South Pars gas fields and replace them with domestic ones.

Royal-Dutch Shell and Spain's Repsol have locked in negotiations with Iran since around 2002 to develop phases 13 and 14 of South Pars but they have delayed a decision on their investments amid growing Western pressure of new sanctions against Tehran.

"The oil ministry has issued an ultimatum to Shell and Repsol and they are expected to make a decision about phases 13 and 14 of South Pars in two weeks time," Reza Kasaizadeh, chief of National Iranian Gas Export Company told Mehr news agency.

"If they don't act promptly, we will hand over these two phases to capable Iranian firms."

Kasaizadeh said the two companies had been involved in developing the liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects for a "long time", but they have "not reached the FID (final investment decision) stage yet after all this time."

Social News

Iran hangs 5 Kurdish activists, including woman

Tehran, May 09 - Five Kurdish activists, including a woman, were hanged on Sunday in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison.

The Tehran public prosecutor's office in a statement said Shirin Alam-Houli, Ali Heydarian, Mahdi Islamian, Farzad Kamangar, and Farhad Vakili were hanged at dawn.

They were convicted of 'Moharebeh', or 'waging war on God', in 2008 for membership in opposition Kurdish groups, including PJAK, and acting against State security.

Last week opposition websites published the text of a letter by Ms. Alam-Houli, 29, in which she described the abuse she had suffered during her three years in prison.

Ms. Alam-Houli wrote that she had was told last Sunday by Intelligence Ministry interrogators in the prison's infamous Ward 209 that she would only be spared from the death sentence if she took part in a televised 'confession' to denounce her previous activities. "They asked me to repeat what they were saying, and I refused", she wrote.

According to sources from the town of Kamyaran, where Mr. Kamangar was a teacher for 12 years, hundreds took to the streets to condemn the execution despite a large presence of security forces.

Mr. Kamangar's lawyer, Khalil Bahramian, told Deutsche Welle radio that his client had been sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court during a five-minute trial and denied the due process of law.

Iran observers note that the dramatic hike in the number of hangings, including this morning's executions, reflects growing anxiety among officials over a week of anti-government protests that the opposition has called for beginning 10 June.

Amnesty International says Iran carried out the highest number of executions in 2009 after China. The human rights watchdog recently warned that another political prisoner, Jaafar Kazemi, 47, was at imminent risk of execution for participating in anti-government demonstrations last year and for being in contact with the main Iranian opposition group People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI/MEK).

Last week, Amnesty urged the Iranian authorities to reveal how many Afghan nationals it was holding on death row amid reports 45 Afghans may have been executed in Iran in recent weeks.

Iran bans dissident clerics' writings at Book Fair

Authorities have removed books written by two senior dissident ayatollahs at the Tehran International Book Fair.

Officials say some 200,000 books have been put on display for the 10-day event, which opened to the public Wednesday at the Imam Khomeini Mosalla (Prayer Hall).

But the works of Grand Ayatollah Yousef Sanei were removed from stalls on the opening day.

Sanei, 73, is believed to oppose some of the hard-line policies of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Following the Presidential election last summer, there were rumours that he issued a fatwa rejecting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Sanei has not held public office since retiring from the Guardians Council in 1983 but is a considerably influential figure since he is one of a few clerics to hold the title of Grand Ayatollah.

Books published by the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri have also been removed from the book fair.

Montazeri, who was Iran's highest-ranking dissident ayatollah until his death in December, remained a controversial figure for most of the post-1979 revolution period. He was for several years the designated successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, but was demoted in 1988 after he spoke out against the massacre of political prisoners in the summer of that year. He was placed under house arrest in the 90s for openly challenging the authority of current Supreme Leader Khamenei, and he issued a fatwa ordering Khamenei's removal from power following the state-orchestrated crackdown on anti-government protests that swept the nation last year. Major anti-government rallies were held immediately after his death.

Museum of Contemporary Art Invited to Venice Biennale of Architecture

Roberto Rosolen, an official of the 12th Venice Biennale of Architecture met with Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMCA) Director Mahmud Shaluyi and invited representatives of the museum to attend the biennale this year.

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They both met at the headquarters of the biennial in Venice where Rosolen officially invited TMCA for the biennial running from August 29 to November 21.

He noted that this is the first time Iran will be taking part in the biennale of architecture, which is of considerable significance.

Rosolen also expressed hope that Iran will be establishing a permanent exhibit in Venice. He also asked for boosting the activities of the museum in the city of Venice.

Iran boasts a number of highly professional artists who are able to actively participate in international programs, he stressed.

Shaliii, who is also the director of Iran's Office for Visual Arts, asked the official to help introduce Iranian art and architecture at the biennial in the best manner possible.

Symposium on Caspian Climate Change Opens in Sari

The second International Symposium on Climate Change and Dendrochronology in Caspian Ecosystems opened in Research Institute and Faculty of Natural Resources of Sari University, Mazandaran province yesterday.

Over 420 Iranian and foreign experts from home and abroad are taking part in the three-day event.

Several objectives -- providing a forum for scientists and discussing the techniques for investigating climate change and dendrochronology, presenting challenges in climate change, dendrochronology studies and its importance, providing an opportunity for scientists to discuss their observational, analytical and modeling approaches with other research teams in order to stimulate methodological improvements -- will be discussed during the event.

The Symposium aims to encourage young scientists and post-graduate students to get concerned about climate change and dendrochronology studies and allow experts to identify analytical techniques needed to reliably forecast climate change impacts.