

Bush Keeps Up Pressure on Iran

Contributed by BRIAN KNOWLTON, New York Times / Debka
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WASHINGTON — President Bush said Wednesday that the United States still strongly preferred diplomacy as it confronts rising tensions and uncertainty over Iran, but that, as always, "all options are on the table."

He also acknowledged that it had been a "tough month" in Afghanistan as more American and coalition troops had died there in June than in any month since the American-led forces invaded in 2001, making it the second straight month when combat deaths exceeded those in Iraq.

But Mr. Bush asserted that it had been a tough month for the Taliban and Al Qaeda as well, and he declined to say whether he might order more troops sent there before the end of the year, ahead of the end of his presidency. Violence has spiked in Afghanistan even as the foreign troop presence has neared its highest level in seven years.

The president's comments came as he took reporters' questions while explaining his hopes for the summit meeting of the Group of 8 leading industrialized countries next week. Leaders of those countries are expected to focus on soaring global energy prices, the urgent food crisis affecting many nations, climate change, trade and terrorism. The meeting is to begin Monday in the city of Toyako, on the northern island of Hokkaido.

Mr. Bush again emphasized his administration's support for a "strong dollar," even as the dollar's weakening has contributed to record oil and gasoline prices; and he said any climate change agreement could only be effective if it included India and China.

He also issued a strong call for the Group of 8 countries to show "accountability" on commitments made at earlier meetings, and he linked that to an issue he has hoped will be a significant foreign achievement of his presidency: making progress against the HIV/AIDS virus in Africa. "We need people who not only make promises but write checks," Mr. Bush said. "Accountability is really important when it comes to our work on the continent of Africa."

Yet, even as Mr. Bush fears that some countries might backtrack on the aid they promised at the 2005 Group of 8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, his administration has had trouble gaining reauthorization for its own aid program, stalled for now in Congress amid objections from some Republicans.

The president's comments on Iran essentially restated administration policy, but they came as the region has seen a confusing succession of warnings, threats and, just this week, signs of a suddenly more-conciliatory tone emanating from some Iranian officials.

A major Israeli military exercise last month appeared to be a rehearsal for a potential airstrike on Iranian nuclear facilities, American officials said. In response, Tehran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint at the mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 40 percent of the world's oil passes, if it were attacked by Israel.

Then on Wednesday, the commander of United States naval forces in the Persian Gulf said the United States Navy and its regional allies would stop any such Iranian action. "We will not allow Iran to close it," Vice Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff, commander of the Fifth Fleet, told reporters after a regional security meeting in Abu Dhabi, The Associated Press reported.

When asked about the threat involving the Strait of Hormuz, Mr. Bush spoke emphatically. "I have always said that all options are on table, but the first option for the United States is to solve this problem diplomatically," he said. "That is why we've been pursuing multilateral diplomacy" in an effort to resolve the crisis of the Iranian nuclear program.

Asked whether he would strongly discourage Israel from attacking Iran, the president said that he had made it "very clear to all parties that the first option" should be a diplomatic resolution, and he repeated his warning to Tehran that it would be increasingly isolated if it continued its nuclear enrichment activities.

At a Pentagon briefing just after Mr. Bush's Rose Garden briefing, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, underscored the Bush administration's preference for diplomatic pressure, saying it would be "extremely stressful" for a severely stretched United States military to be drawn into a fight with Iran. "Just about every move in that part of the world is a high-risk move," he said.

On Tuesday, two top Iranian officials sounded conciliatory notes about the prospects for ending the impasse over the country's nuclear program.

In Tehran, Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warned against "provocative" remarks on the nuclear crisis. And in New York, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, struck a soft tone in a talk with reporters, and refused to repeat the usual Iranian statement that it would never give up its right to uranium enrichment.

On Afghanistan, Mr. Bush said: "It has been a tough month in Afghanistan but it has also been a tough month for the Taliban. One reason why there have been more deaths is because our troops are taking the fight to a tough enemy."

Senior military leaders have pledged to increase troops in Afghanistan next year. But in the meantime, Bush said, "We're constantly reviewing troops needs, troop levels."

Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Helene Cooper contributed reporting.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/03/washington/03prexycnd.html>

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 DEBKAfile Special Report July 5, 2008, 1:14 PM (GMT+02:00) Iran's chief of staff Maj. Gen Hasan Firuzabadi
 Chief of staff Maj. Gen. Hasan Firuzabadi said Saturday, July, 5, Iran's strategy is to keep the Strait of Hormuz in "southern Iran" open, but "if the country's interests are jeopardized in the region, we will not let any ship pass through." DEBKAfile's military sources report that this statement, quoted by the official IRNA agency, enlarges on earlier threats by the IRGC commander Ali Jafari that the waterway would be closed if Iran was attacked. Iran's "strategic interests in the region" cited now by Firuzabadi could extend to attacks on its allies and terrorist arms, Syria, Hizballah or Hamas. It is in keeping with Iran's refusal to give up uranium enrichment in its reply to the six-power proposals for ending the nuclear standoff. Iran offered nothing more than negotiations, its standard gambit for spinning out time to achieve progress on its nuclear bomb program. The latest drumbeat from Tehran also posed a fresh challenge to Washington after Adm. Mike Mullen, Chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned on July 2 that the US would not let Iran block the strategic waterway through which 40 percent of the world's oil supplies are transported. The New York Times Saturday quoted Tehran as stating: "The time for negotiations from the condescending position of inequality has come to an end," in its response to the incentives package offered by the five UN Security Council members plus Germany. The letter made no reference to the proposal of preliminary talks to start with a mutual six-week "freeze" both on a fourth round of UN Security Council sanctions and on the expansion of Iran's uranium enrichment program. Further hardening its position, Tehran's reply to the proposals presented last month by European Union foreign executive Javier Solana denounces such sanctions as "illegal." Chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili was named to lead the delegation in comprehensive negotiations. By failing to address the "freeze-for-freeze" approach, in which high hopes of a more accommodating Iranian approach had been pinned, Tehran has put an end to the optimistic intimations emanating from Washington, Europe and Israeli officials in the last two weeks. Some American sources were certain that a closed Iranian parliamentary conference Monday, June 30, had endorsed the mutual freeze offer. DEBKAfile's Iranian sources add: The Iranian reply to Solana demonstrates that Tehran was not intimidated by the implied threats of an imminent US and/or Israel attack on its nuclear facilities published in the last two weeks; neither is Iran deterred from continuing to enrich uranium by the prospect of more sanctions. Even in accepting the offer of negotiations, the Islamic Republic stiffly denies any world power the right to strike a "condescending position." <http://www.debka.com/headline.php?hid=5411>