

Military force against Iran still an option: US

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Obama team drafting letter to heal Iran rift: report
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America's top military officer has said that using US military force against Iran remains an option, though it would be a "last resort";

"Iran is unhelpful in many, many ways in many, many areas, and so I wouldn't be overly optimistic at this point," Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told foreign correspondents on Tuesday.

Mullen spoke of positive change in Iraq and credited the reduction in violence there to the troop surge and the changes in Iraq's perception of Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups.

"Clearly, security is much better, but it isn't just having the extra troops," he said. "It's how they're being employed. And that strategy has worked up to this point in time, very effectively. And it has a lot to do with being out in the villages and towns and out and about where the Iraqi citizens live."

Conceding that Baghdad still is "a very violent city," he said violence has been reduced in most parts of the country, "with the Iraqi people themselves playing a key role."

On being asked what was the single biggest challenge facing the US military, Mullen replied, "Afghanistan and Pakistan."

He said President Barack Obama made that clear, which "sends a very strong message that Afghanistan and Pakistan are at the top of the list ... The selection of former Ambassador (Richard) Holbrooke to focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan is another very strong signal."

Turning to India and Pakistan, the chairman said contacts with India are good and growing.

"We are in a position where we've had in recent years an increased number of military-to-military contacts, and I think that's positive," he said. "I'm actually very positive about the continuing and emerging relationship between the United States and India."
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Obama team drafting letter to heal Iran rift: report Reuters - 29 January, 2009

Officials of U.S. President Barack Obama's administration are drafting a letter to Iran from the president aimed at unfreezing U.S.-Iranian relations and opening the way for face-to-face talks, Britain's Guardian newspaper reported on Thursday.

The U.S. State Department has been working on drafts of the letter since Obama was elected last November, the report said. It was a response to a letter of congratulations sent by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after Obama's poll victory.

The letter gives assurances that Washington does not want to overthrow the Iranian administration, but instead seeks changes in its behavior, the paper said. It would be addressed to the Iranian people and sent directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, or released as an open letter.

In Washington, a State Department official said the policy on Iran was under review and declined to comment on whether a letter was possibly being prepared to send to the Iranians.

"No decision on any specific policy initiative has yet been decided by the State Department," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Guardian said the letter was being considered by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as part of a review of U.S. policy on Iran. A decision on sending it was not expected until the review was complete.

The United States broke off diplomatic ties with Iran after students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran following the 1979 revolution.

U.S. suspicions that Iran was trying to develop a nuclear weapon and the presence of thousands of U.S. troops in neighboring Iraq have been the main hurdles to rebuilding relations in recent years.

The new U.S. administration has said Obama would break with his predecessor by pursuing direct talks with Tehran but has also warned Iran to expect more pressure if it did not meet a U.N. Security Council demand to halt sensitive nuclear work on uranium enrichment.

A close aide to Ahmadinejad told Reuters on Wednesday that Iran would not curtail its nuclear work.

"We have no non-peaceful activities to suspend. All our activities are peaceful and under the supervision of the IAEA," presidential adviser Aliakbar Javanfekr said.