

Cleric: Iran Respects Iraq's Sovereignty

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- A top Iranian cleric on Friday heaped praise on the Iraqi army troops for their recent victories against the ISIL Takfiri terrorists, reaffirming the Islamic Republic's support for Iraq's territorial integrity.

"The Islamic Iran supports Iraq's territorial integrity and Iran's aid for this country aims to thwart enemies' plots to disintegrate Iraq," Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami said in a sermon to worshippers during weekly Friday Prayers in Tehran. "Not only do we recognize Iraqi borders, but also we respect all international frontiers," the senior cleric added.

\$7.8 Billion Iran Oil Money Stranded

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- Iran has not received yet \$7.8 billion in revenues from the sale of its crude oil in recent months, Government spokesman Muhammad Baqer Nobakht said without explanation.

Iran's oil customers are mainly China, India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey but U.S. and European sanctions are preventing international banks from transferring money to the Islamic Republic. Nobakht said oil revenues in the past 12 months had totaled \$52.8 billion at the official rate of the U.S. dollar.

**Viewpoint**

By: Kayhan Int'l Staff Writer

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ISIL Takfiris Face Ultimate Rout in Tikrit

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) -- Iraqi forces Friday battled ISIL terrorists making what looked increasingly like a last stand in Tikrit, but the group responded by vowing to expand its "caliphate".

Thousands of fighters surrounded a few hundred ISIL holdouts, pounding their positions with helicopter and artillery strikes but treading carefully to avoid the thousands of bombs littering the city center.

Two days after units spearheading Baghdad's biggest anti-ISIL operation yet pushed deep into Tikrit, a police colonel claimed around 50% of the city was now back in government hands.

"We are surrounding the gunmen in the city center. We're advancing slowly due to the great number of IEDs (improvised explosive devices)," he told AFP.

"We estimate there are 10,000 IEDs in the city," he said.

Massively outnumbered, the terrorists are defending themselves with a network of booby traps, roadside bombs and snipers, with suicide attackers occasionally ramming car bombs into enemy targets.

"Six soldiers were killed and 11 wounded in a suicide car bomb this morning in Al-Dyum neighborhood," the colonel said. An army major confirmed the death toll.

Tikrit was the hometown of dictator Saddam Hussein, remnants of whose Ba'ath party collaborated with the ISIL terrorists when they took over almost a third of the country last June.

With crucial military backing from neighboring Iran, Baghdad has rolled back some of the losses.

It started by securing the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf and bolstering Baghdad's defenses, then worked its way north, retaking Diyala province earlier this year.

Commanders see the recapture of Tikrit as a stepping stone for the re-conquest of second city Mosul further north, which once had a population of two million.

ISIL has countered every military loss lately by ramping up its propaganda war with ever more shocking acts, such as a boy apparently executing a prisoner on camera, and destroying priceless archaeological heritage sites.

On Thursday, the group released a recording said to be a speech by spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani accepting a pledge of allegiance by Nigeria's Boko Haram terrorist group.

"We announce to you the good news of the expansion of the caliphate to West Africa," he said.

Expansion is a pillar of ISIL doctrine, and the Takfiri group has recently declared new "provinces" in the Middle East and North Africa,

albeit sometimes in places where it has a limited footprint.

Adnani shrugged off recent losses in Iraq and Syria, vowing to enter Rome, blow up the White House, Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower.

Some analysts have argued that months of battlefield setbacks and airstrikes were taking a toll on the group and that some of its latest moves concealed growing desperation.

Adnani lashed out General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Iran's external operations, calling him the leader of the battle.

Gen. Soleimani has been ubiquitous on Iraq's frontlines, and his myth is growing among Iraqi fighters.

He appeared in a rare mobile phone video released Thursday, giving advice in Arabic, apparently to the sons of a prominent Iraqi militia leader on how to behave themselves.

Suleimani has been seen with Iraq's top commanders since the start of the Tikrit operation and is thought to be playing a key coordinating role.

"That Suleimani has become acceptable can only be explained by the collapse of the Iraqi army last summer," said Kirk Sowell, the publisher of the Inside Iraqi Politics newsletter.

The way the army disintegrated when ISIL swept in nine months ago has led many Iraqis to give more trust and credit to the paramilitary Shia groups supported by Iran.

"When people feel endangered, they always reach for a savior," Sowell said.

Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who already called last year for volunteers to fight ISIL, said Friday that Baghdad must increase its support to fighters battling the Takfiri terrorists.

"It is imperative for the state to increase the attention and care for all the brother fighters and do its utmost to increase their performance and preserve gains," Ayatollah Sistani said in remarks read out by his representative.

Ayatollah Khamenei: Collapse of Political Ethics in U.S. Exposed



Ayatollah Khamenei talks with members of the Assembly of Experts during a meeting in Tehran.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has urged Iranian negotiators in the nuclear talks with the P5+1 group of world powers to exercise vigilance over the subterfuge of the other side.

"The team assigned by President (Hassan Rouhani) to attend the talks constitute good, reliable and sympathetic individuals who are trying to secure the country's interests," said

the Leader on Thursday in a meeting with the members of the Assembly of Experts.

Iranian officials "know what they are doing and they also know how to act in case of an agreement so that Americans cannot break it later", said Ayatollah Khamenei.

Nevertheless, the Leader expressed misgivings over potential duplicity by the P5+1 in the negotiations.

"Some think that the United States does not need to act cunningly or do tricks because of its political, economic and military power," the Leader said. "But the Americans need to use tricks, deception and backstabbing a lot, and they are doing the same now, and this reality worries us."

The Leader also denounced an open letter by 47 Republican senators to Iran, warning that any nuclear deal with the Obama administration could be reversed.

The letter, the Leader said, is a sign of "the collapse of political ethics and the U.S. system's internal disintegration", according to the official IRNA news agency.

Ayatollah Khamenei said states typically remain loyal to their commitments even if governments

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Report: UN Weighs Lifting Iran Sanctions

NEW YORK (Dispatches) -- Major world powers are considering a UN Security Council resolution to lift UN sanctions against Iran if a nuclear agreement is struck this month, Western officials told Reuters Thursday.

Though officials in Tehran and Washington have warned that work remains before an agreement is reached, the Security Council is seeking to lay the groundwork to lift restrictions quickly should the sides come together.

"If there's a nuclear deal, and that's still a big 'if', we'll want to move quickly on the UN sanctions issue," an official who declined to be named told the news agency.

Iran and six world powers are currently engaged in high-stakes talks to lift sanctions on the Islamic Republic in return for assurances that Tehran's nuclear program is peaceful.

Talks thus far have dealt primarily with easing the U.S. and EU sanctions against Iran in exchange for the Islamic Republic curbing its nuclear enrichment program.

But in this latest development, non-Iranian officials involved in the negotiations now claim to be discussing a resolution for the 15-nation Security Council that would ease the UN sanctions that have been in place against Iran since December 2006, according to Reuters.

A resolution reached by the Security Council would be legally binding on the U.S., and could thwart attempts by U.S. lawmakers to scupper a deal.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry told U.S. senators that a deal being worked out with Iran and Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, Germany and Iran would not be legally binding, and thus not come under congressional oversight.

The claim came in response to a letter by 47 Republican senators earlier in the week who threatened Iran that any deal reached with the U.S. could be revoked when President Barack Obama leaves office.

Analysts say, though, that lifting U.S.-imposed sanctions would need Congressional approval.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, U.S. State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki refused to speak about possible Security Council moves to lift sanctions, saying she did not want to get "ahead of the process".

She said that they were "part of the discussion".

A framework for the deal must be struck by March 31 and a final deal setting out all the technical points of what would be a complex accord by June 30. Iran has said any deal should be made all at the same time.

Americans Seek Trial of Senators for 'Treason'

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- More than 165,000 people had signed a petition to the White House in less than two days urging charges be filed against 47 Republican senators who they say committed "treasonous" offenses by writing Iran about their plan to torpedo ongoing nuclear negotiations.

Lawmakers caused a political furor with their controversial letter Monday that warned an international nuclear deal with Iran could be scrapped by the next U.S. president, particularly if Congress does not give its seal of approval.

The White House has said it responds to such petitions when they reach the 100,000-signature threshold, providing President Barack Obama's administration with another opportunity to slam a letter that it considers inflammatory.

According to the petition, the 47 senators "committed a treasonous offense when they decided to violate the Logan Act, a 1799 law which forbids unauthorized citizens from negotiating with foreign governments".

Critics argue that the lawmakers, including at least three potential Republican 2016 presidential candidates, broke the law, or at least violated the traditions of Congress, by directly engaging a foreign power on U.S. foreign policy.

Obama and Vice President Joe Biden pilloried the letter, as did several Democratic congressional leaders. Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif called it "unprecedented and undiplomatic".

With no one indicted under the Logan Act since 1803, and zero successful prosecutions under that law, it is highly unlikely the 47 lawmakers -- who include top Senate Republican leaders -- are going to prison.

But the petition does help highlight the intensely divisive nature of the letter, which some in the Republican Party have acknowledged was not the ideal strategy for confronting Iran.

Negotiations with the Islamic Republic "are tough enough here and I didn't think it was appropriate to add another element that makes it more difficult", Senate Republican Jeff Flake told National Public Radio.

The letter could jeopardize the fragile

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