

# Iran, Sudan close ranks in face of Western pressure

KHARTOUM (AFP) - Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his first visit to Sudan on Wednesday extended full support to his counterpart Omar al-Beshir, blaming the United States and its allies for the region's woes.

On a two-day visit aimed at bolstering ties between the oil-producing Islamic states — both considered state sponsors of terrorism by Washington —, the Iranian leader held talks with Beshir and several other senior officials.

"The forces of hegemony that are exerting pressure on the government and people of Sudan do not want to see a strong and effective" country, Ahmadinejad said before going into closed-door talks with his Sudanese counterpart.

"We are confident that our brothers, the president of Sudan and his colleagues... will forge ahead and present a united front in confronting those challenges," he said.

Ahmadinejad later met Sudan's First Vice President Salva Kiir, who heads the



Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir (R) greets his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) in Khartoum. Ahmadinejad on his first visit to Sudan on Wednesday gives support to his counterpart Beshir, blaming the United States for the region's woes.

former southern rebel movement's presence in the national unity cabinet but has often expressed differences with Beshir.

The Iranian president did

not explicitly comment on Tuesday's decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to request summonses for two Sudanese officials suspected of war crimes in

the western region of Darfur.

The move represented the first attempt to hold criminally liable officials suspected of masterminding the atrocities carried out against

civilians in Darfur over the past four years.

One of the two officials is Ahmed Haroun, the current secretary of state for humanitarian affairs, while the other is Ali Kosheib, a pro-government militia leader.

"Our enemies are trying to destabilise us but we are capable of foiling their plot," said Beshir, who also reiterated Khartoum's support for Iran's nuclear programme, which the West is concerned will be used to manufacture weapons.

Without naming it, Ahmadinejad also blamed the United States for destabilising Lebanon and "planting the seeds of sectarian discord" in Iraq.

The two delegations were expected to hold wide-ranging talks aimed at increasing bilateral cooperation in agriculture and industry that should culminate Thursday with the signing of a package of agreements.

"Relations are at a very good level... We have many economic and cultural projects, in agriculture, energy and oil exploration in

Sudan and culture," Ahmadinejad said before leaving Tehran.

Iran's ambassador to Khartoum, Reza Amiri, said he hoped business partnerships could help increase the volume of two-way trade to 70 million dollars a year from the current level of 43 million dollars.

Iran has also offered its expertise in the oil industry, an area currently dominated by China, India and Malaysia.

However, an issue that has also been at the heart of Iran-Sudan ties is military cooperation, with Sudanese Defence Minister Abdel Rahim Mohammed Hussein having visited Iran three times over the past year.

Hussein, a former interior minister and presidential adviser, is considered a key suspect by right groups in the abuses that have plagued Darfur since February 2002.

Iran — together with China, whose President Hu Jintao visited Khartoum earlier this month — is a key ally of Beshir's regime and spoken out against plans for a UN deployment in Darfur.

"Sudan and Iran feel targeted and must respond by making diplomatic efforts to better explain their positions in regional and international forums," Sudanese presidential adviser Mustafa Othman Ismail said this week.

Rights groups and Darfur rebels have urged the ICC to target more senior Sudanese officials, including the defence minister and Beshir himself.

## Westerners put on alert in Saudi after French killings

RIYADH (AFP) - Western embassies in Saudi Arabia have advised their nationals to be on alert after the killing of four Frenchmen left expatriates wondering if this might signal a resumption of anti-Western attacks.

Several residents on Wednesday said that while they were shocked by Monday's shootings near the Muslim holy city of Medina, they would only be alarmed if a further attack took place.

"If it were to happen again, it would send a ripple of concern across the expatriate community and have a very negative effect," said Peter Howarth-Lees, the British manager of a residential compound inhabited by expatriates in Riyadh.

"At the moment, we don't know if this was an isolated incident, a hate crime by some locals who don't like Westerners," or a precursor of renewed attacks by suspected Al-Qaeda militants such as those which climaxed in 2004, he told AFP.

"Security forces since 2004 have made great strides in taking out a lot of militants operating in the country," Howarth-Lees said.

John Wiese, a 55-year-old Canadian who regularly goes

on desert trips, said expatriates were wondering whether the killing of the Frenchmen was "a one-off incident or was linked to the previous campaign" against Westerners.

Wiese said he had planned a desert camping with friends on Thursday but they dropped the outing "not because we are scared, but because we are upset" over the killings.

The four victims were among three French families returning to Riyadh after a visit to an historic site in northwestern Saudi Arabia and were shot dead by masked gunmen in a desert area.

But Wiese said he was still planning to go out hiking in the desert with friends on Friday.

Saudis encountered on desert trips are "open and friendly," he said, recalling a group of locals who were "absolutely wonderful when one of our vehicles had trouble" during an outing north of Riyadh last weekend.

"So far, there has been sadness, shock and anger (over the shootings) but not so much fear... Everybody feels very positive about

what the government has been doing, its zero tolerance toward any aspect of terrorism," Wiese said, referring to the relentless crackdown on militants by Saudi security forces.

"We can't let fear govern our lives. I have faith in this country and the way authorities have dealt so far with the problem of terrorism," said Raymond Romestant, an American resident.

"Forget all labels: we had four people killed — three or four people are killed every day in every country, four were probably killed in America that day. There are different reasons these things happen," he said.

Andre Maillet-Contoz, a French engineer who knew the victims and occasionally went on desert trips with them outside Riyadh, said he thought the shootings were a case of "bad luck" rather than a planned attack.

But "I will become more cautious now, that's for sure. I will not completely change my way of life, but I will avoid traveling in remote areas," he told AFP.

Two of the victims, Jean-Marc Bonnet and his 17-year-old son Romain, were Muslim, and Saudi newspa-

pers reported on Wednesday that funeral prayers were held for them at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Islam's second holiest site.

Bonnet's widow, Zakia Raffouk, was of Moroccan origin.

The French embassy in Riyadh on Wednesday issued a security message reminding the 3,600 French nation-

als in the country to be cautious and limit their movements.

The embassy "also advises our nationals currently travelling within the kingdom to return to their bases by the most secure routes," the message said.

The US and British embassies also urged their citizens to be vigilant.



### HARSH REALITY

The wreckage of a bus is removed from Zahedan after a powerful car bomb killed 11 members of the Revolutionary Guards earlier last month. The number of dead from a bomb blast against Revolutionary Guards in southeastern Iran rose to 13 after two wounded victims died in hospital.