

Bush, Germany call for stop to Iranian nuclear ambition

Bush and German chancellor find common ground although disagreements on Iraq, global warming persist

BY TOM RAUM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MAINZ, Germany — President Bush and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder insisted Wednesday that Iran must not have nuclear weapons, but remained divided on how to coax Tehran into giving up its suspected ambitions for such an arsenal.

"It's vital that the Iranians hear the world speak with one voice that they shouldn't have a nuclear weapon," Bush said at a news conference with the German leader.

Both sought to play down the differences between the United States and Europe.

"We absolutely agree that Iran must say 'no' to any kind of nuclear weapon," Schroeder said.

Bush made his nine-hour stop during a trip to Belgium, Germany and Slovakia, where the president meets today with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Schroeder wants Bush to more actively engage with talks led by Germany, France and Britain that offer incentives to Tehran, such as membership in the World Trade Organization, in return for dropping its uranium enrichment program.

"There needs to be movement on both sides," Schroeder said.

Bush, in contrast, backs the European diplomacy but frowns on the idea of rewarding Iran for breaking the nonproliferation treaty that prohibits it from making nuclear fuel or sponsoring terrorist groups in Israel, such as Hezbollah.

"We will work with them to convince the mullahs that they need to give up their nuclear ambitions," Bush said of the Europeans.

But he added: "The reason we're having these discussions is because they were caught enriching uranium after they had signed a treaty saying they wouldn't enrich uranium. ... They're the party that needs to be held to account, not any of us."

From Tehran, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said Iran will not permanently halt a nuclear program it insists is designed only for peaceful purposes.

"Neither my government nor any other (Iranian) government can give up the definite right of the Iranian nation to have peaceful nuclear technology," Khatami said.

"We have to give objective guarantees to the (European) gentlemen that we won't divert from the peaceful path. They must also ... give objective guarantees that our rights and security will be protected."

Also on Wednesday, Bush addressed about 3,000 U.S. troops at Wiesbaden Air Base in Germany, many of whom had just returned from Iraq. He also toured a museum dedicated to Mainz native Johannes Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press, with Schroeder.

At a round-table meeting with young Germans, Bush emphasized the close relationship he and Schroeder have with the Russian leader, who is under criticism from the West for rolling back some democratic reforms.

"I expressed some concerns at the European Union yesterday about some of the decisions, such as freedom of the press, that our mutual friend has made," Bush said. "I look forward to talking with him about his decision-making process."

A senior administration official, who briefed reporters on Air Force One during the flight to Germany, said Bush rejects Putin's defense of tighter government controls — namely that the Russian people are accustomed to the strong rule of the czars and a large government role in everyday life. "An argument that 'My people need a strong ruler — me' is an argument that does not fit with the way the president talks about democracy," said the official, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Bush and Schroeder, meanwhile, seemed resigned to differences on issues such as global warming and, especially, the U.S.-led war in Iraq that Germany vehemently opposed.

"Now, our joint interest is that we come to a stable, democratic Iraq," Schroeder said.

Even though Germany refuses to go into the war-torn nation,

Schroeder noted its role in training Iraqi security officers in the United Arab Emirates and its willingness to help the new Iraqi government draft a constitution or establish ministries.

"I fully understand the limitations of German contributions," Bush said.

The leader of Germany's main opposition party, the conservative Christian Democrats, said after a 15-minute meeting with Bush that relations appear on the mend. "I got the impression that trans-Atlantic relations are really in a new phase," Angela Merkel told ARD television.

But the sticky issue of Iran dominated the Bush-Schroeder meeting and news conference.

National Security Advisor Steve Hadley said the administration supports the Europeans' negotiations with Iran, but insist they produce a permanent halt to Iran's uranium enrichment.

Hadley said the leaders discussed whether there should "be a mix of carrots and sticks and who should the carrots come from and what should they be." But he stopped short of saying Bush was retreating from his belief that Iran should not be rewarded, saying Bush "did a lot of listening" and now will "go back and think about it."

Bush also repeated that Syria must remove its forces from Lebanon but didn't threaten any action against Damascus — for now.

"The charge is out there for the Syrian government to hear loud and clear," Bush said. "We will see how they respond before there's any further discussions about going back to the United Nations."

Schroeder welcomed Bush during a snowy arrival ceremony

at a 17th century castle in this city on the Rhine River. A military band played the national anthems of each country as the leaders walked a red carpet reviewing a military honor guard. They posed for photographs with wide smiles, Bush throwing his arm around the chancellor.

Security was so tight that nearly every street in downtown Mainz was closed to traffic.

About 5,000 people participated in a peaceful rally and parade protesting Bush's visit — though they were kept far from the palace meeting site. A recent AP-Ipsos poll showed overwhelming skepticism of Bush in Germany.

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Groups in Iraq vie to win position of prime minister

Iraq's interim prime minister tries to maintain his position, competing with the leading Shiite candidate

BY PATRICK QUINN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Ayad Allawi, the secular interim prime minister, said Wednesday he's putting together a coalition to try to hold onto his job in the next government and block the candidate of the dominant Shiite political alliance. Kurdish parties also weighed in with demands for top posts, setting up a possible showdown over the role of religion in a new Iraq.

Allawi's call for an inclusive coalition that would attract minority Sunni Arabs who form the core of the insurgency came as support for Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the leading Shiite candidate, began slipping in his United Iraqi Alliance.

One day after al-Jaafari, 58, was nominated for the post of prime minister by the clergy-backed alliance, a Shiite political group that supports his one-time challenger, Ahmad Chalabi, threatened to withdraw its support.

The Shiite Political Council demanded the alliance make amends after forcing Chalabi to end his pursuit of the prime minister's post by nominating one of the council's members for the largely ceremonial post of Iraqi president.

But the Kurdish coalition controlling 75 of the 275 seats in the National Assembly has long taken for granted that the alliance, which has 140 seats, will give the presidency to one of its leaders — Jalal Talabani.

"Regarding the nomination for the presidential post, no names were presented officially and we are running nonofficial discussions with all parties, especially with the Kurdish officials here in Baghdad," al-Jaafari spokesman Abdul Razaq Al-Kadhimi said.

The Kurds also issued a separate list of demands that include reinforcing autonomy in their northern provinces.

The presidency requires a two-thirds majority vote from the assembly, the first step in the complicated process of filling the top positions. For al-Jaafari to become prime minister, he must win the approval of his own Shiite alliance, including Chalabi's supporters, and an additional 44 legislators.

Much is at stake because the next prime minister will oversee

the drafting of a new constitution, and some fear al-Jaafari could lead Iraq toward an Islamic theocracy, or even a strictly sectarian Shiite one. Allawi, Chalabi and the Kurds oppose efforts to codify or legislate religion.

Allawi, whose ticket won 40 seats in the assembly, said he considered al-Jaafari an "honorable man." But when asked if he feared the alliance could impose Islamic rule in Iraq, Allawi said he opposed the creation of any form of Islamic government.

"We are liberal powers and we believe in a liberal Iraq and not an Iraq governed by political Islamists. But as a person he is an honorable man, fighter and a good brother," Allawi said.

Al-Jaafari is one of the interim government's two vice presidents and heads Dawa, a conservative Islamic religious party. He fought Saddam Hussein and took refuge in Iran for a decade in the 1980s when Shiite clergy solidified their rule in Iran.

In forming his new coalition to unseat al-Jaafari, Allawi asked the Sunni Arab minority, which mostly boycotted the Jan. 30 elections, to play a role in the new government. Such a move could go a long way toward helping deflate the insurgency, thought mostly to be made up of Sunnis who once belonged to Saddam's Baath party.

Allawi, 60, has staunchly opposed the effort to rid the government and administration of former Baathists.

"The missions ahead of us are very great. Above all is achieving national unity by deed and not just by word, and through the integration of the Iraqi sectors which didn't participate in the elections," Allawi said.

Much of the violence in Iraq has been blamed on fighters from other countries, such as neighboring Syria.

On Wednesday, a U.S.-funded Iraqi state television station aired what it said were the confessions of an alleged Syrian intelligence officer and a group of Iraqi insurgents he purportedly trained to behead people and carry out attacks against American and Iraqi troops. There was no immediate reaction from Syria.

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