

January 24

Iran Must Get Ready to Repel a Nuclear Attack

General Leonid Ivashov

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In the overall flow of information coming from the Middle East, there are increasingly frequent reports indicating that within several months from now the US will deliver nuclear strikes on Iran. For example, citing well-informed but undisclosed sources, the Kuwaiti Arab Times wrote that the US plans to launch a missile and bomb attack on the territory of Iran before the end of April, 2007. The campaign will start from the sea and will be supported by the Patriot missile defense systems in order to let the US forces avoid a ground operation and to reduce the efficiency of the return strike by "any Persian Gulf country".

"Any country" mostly refers to Iran. The source which supplied the information to the Kuwaiti paper believes that the US forces in Iraq and other countries of the region will be defended from any Iranian missile strikes by the frontier Patriots.

So, the preparations for a new US aggression entered the completion phase. The executions of S. Hussein and his closest associates were a part of these preparations. Their purpose was to serve as a "disguise operation" for the efforts of the US strategists to deliberately escalate the situation both around Iran and in the entire Middle East.

Analyzing the consequences of the move, the US did order to hang the former Iraqi leader and his associates. This shows that the US has adopted irreversibly the plan of partitioning Iraq into three warring pseudo-states – the Shiite, the Sunnite, and the Kurdish ones. Washington reckons that the situation of a controlled chaos will help it to dominate the Persian Gulf oil supplies and other strategically important oil transportation routes.

The most important aspect of the matter is that a zone of an endless bloody conflict will be created at the core of the Middle East, and that the countries neighboring Iraq – Iran, Syria, Turkey (Kurdistan) – will inevitably be getting drawn into it. This will solve the problem of completely destabilizing the region, a task of major importance for the US and especially for Israel. The war in Iraq was just one element in a series of steps in the process of regional destabilization. It was only a phase in the process of getting closer to dealing with Iran and other countries, which the US declared or will declare rouge.

However it is not easy for the US to get involved in yet another military campaign while Iraq and Afghanistan are not "pacified" (the US lacks the resources necessary for the operation). Besides, protests against the politics of the Washington neocons intensify all over the world. Due to all of the above, the US will use nuclear weapon against Iran. This will be the second case of the use of nuclear weapons in combat after the 1945 US attack on Japan.

The Israeli military and political circles had been making statements on the possibility of nuclear and missile strikes on Iran openly since October, 2006, when the idea was immediately supported by G. Bush. Currently it is touted in the form of a "necessity" of nuclear strikes. The public is taught to believe that there is nothing monstrous about such a possibility and that, on the contrary, a nuclear strike is quite feasible. Allegedly, there is no other way to "stop" Iran.

How will other nuclear powers react? As for Russia, at best it will limit itself to condemning the strikes, and at worst – as in the case of the aggression against Yugoslavia – its response will be something like "though by this the US makes a mistake, the victim itself provoked the attack".

Europe will react in essentially the same way. Possibly, the negative reaction of China and several other countries to the nuclear aggression will be stronger. In any case, there will be no retaliation nuclear strike on the US forces (the US is absolutely sure of this).

The UN means nothing in this context. Having failed to condemn the aggression against Yugoslavia, the UN Security Council effectively shared the responsibility for it. This institution is only capable to adopt resolutions which the Russian and also the French diplomacy understands as banning the use of force, but the US and British ones interpret in exactly the opposite sense – as authorizing their aggression.

Speaking of Israel, it is sure to come under the Iranian missile strikes. Possibly, the Hezbollah and the Palestinian resistance will become more active. Posing as victims, the Israelis will resort to provocations to justify their aggression, suffer some tolerable damage, and then the outraged US will destabilize Iran finally, making it look like a noble mission of retribution.

Some people tend to believe that concerns over the world's protests can stop the US. I do not think so. The importance of this factor should not be overstated. In the past, I have spent hours talking to Milosevic, trying to convince him that NATO was preparing to attack Yugoslavia. For a long time, he could not believe this and kept telling me: "Just read the UN Charter. What grounds will they have to do it?"

But they did it. They ignored the international law outrageously and did it. What do we have now? Yes, there was a shock, there was indignation. But the result is exactly what the aggressors wanted – Milosevic is dead, Yugoslavia is partitioned, and Serbia is colonized – NATO officers have set up their headquarters in the country's ministry of defense.

The same things happened to Iraq. There were a shock and indignation. But what matters to the Americans is not how big the shock is, but how high are the revenues of their military-industrial complex.

The information that a second US aircraft-carrier is due to arrive at the Persian Gulf till the end of January makes it possible to analyze the possible evolution of the war situation. Attacking Iran, the US will mostly use air delivery of the nuclear munitions. Cruise missiles (carried by the US aircrafts as well as ships and submarines) and, possibly, ballistic missiles will be used. Probably, nuclear strikes will be followed by air raids from aircraft carriers and by other means of attack.

The US command is trying to exclude a ground operation: Iran has a strong army and the US forces are likely to suffer massive casualties. This is unacceptable for G. Bush who already finds himself in a difficult situation. It does not take a ground operation to destroy infrastructures in Iran, to reverse the development of the country, to cause panic, and to create a political, economic and military chaos. This can be accomplished by using first the nuclear, and subsequently the conventional means of warfare. Such is the purpose of bringing the aircraft carrier group closer to the Iranian coast.

What resources for self-defense does Iran have? They are considerable, but incomparably inferior to the US forces. Iran has 29 Russian Tor systems. Definitely, they are an important reinforcement of the Iranian air defense. However, at present Iran has no guaranteed protection from air raids.

The US tactics will be the same as usual: first, to neutralize the air defense and radars, and then to attack aircrafts in the air and on land, the control installations, and the infrastructure, while taking no risks.

Within weeks from now, we will see the informational warfare machine start working. The public opinion is already under pressure. There will be a growing anti-Iranian militaristic hysteria, new information leaks, disinformation, etc.

At the same time all of the above sends a signal to the pro-Western opposition and to a fraction of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's elite to get ready for the coming developments. The US hopes that an attack on Iran will inevitably result in a chaos in the country, and that it will be possible to bribe some of the Iranian generals and thus to create a fifth column in the country.

Of course, Iran is very different from Iraq. However, if the aggressor succeeds in instigating a conflict between the two branches of the Iranian armed forces – the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps and the army – the country will find itself in a critical situation, especially in case at the very beginning of the campaign the US manages to hit the Iranian leadership and delivers a nuclear strike or a massive one by conventional warfare on the country's central command.

Today, the probability of a US aggression against Iran is extremely high. It does remain unclear, though, whether the US Congress is going to authorize the war. It may take a provocation to eliminate this obstacle (an attack on Israel or the US targets including military bases). The scale of the provocation may be comparable to the 9-11 attack in NY. Then the Congress will certainly say "Yes" to the US President.

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February 10

U.S. weighs divulging Iran-Iraq proof

By KATHERINE SHRADER and ANNE GEARAN, Associated Press Writers Sat Feb 10, 4:43 PM ET

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration is haunted by the history of intelligence blunders about Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction as the United States tries to document that Iran is providing lethal help to Iraqi fighters.

After weeks of preparation and revisions, U.S. officials are preparing to detail evidence supporting administration's claims of Iran's meddling and deadly activities. A briefing was scheduled Sunday in Baghdad.

The Iran dossier, some 200 pages thick in its classified form, was revised heavily after officials decided it was not ready for release as planned last month. What is made public probably would be short, and shorter on details than the administration recently had suggested.

No one who has seen the files has suggested the evidence is thin. But senior officials — gun-shy after the drubbing the administration took for the faulty intelligence leading to the 2003 Iraq invasion — were underwhelmed by the packaging.

Officials from several intelligence agencies scrutinized the presentation to make sure it was clear and that "we don't in any way jeopardize our sources and methods in making the presentation," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Friday.

National security adviser Stephen Hadley recently said some Iran material was overstated. Privately, officials say they want to avoid the kind of gaffe akin to former Secretary of State Colin Powell's case for war before the United Nations in 2003.

"My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions," Powell said as he laid out unproven claims of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. "What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." It later turned out that Iraq did not have such weapons.

The evidence on Iran is intended to give backbone to the administration's claim that an emboldened Iran is playing a dangerous game across the Middle East: meddling in conflicts and planting terrorism beyond its borders while rushing to acquire nuclear know-how that could produce a bomb.

Government officials familiar with the dossier's documents and slides, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the materials still were classified, said they make a compelling case about Iranian actions in Iraq.

Among the evidence the administration planned to present are weapons that were seized over time in U.S.-led raids on caches around Iraq, said one military official. Other evidence includes documents captured when U.S.-led forces raided an Iranian office Jan. 11 in Irbil, a city in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq about 220 miles north of Baghdad, this official said.

In that raid, the U.S. captured five Iranians. They included the operations chief and other members of Iran's elite Quds Force, which is accused of arming and training Iraqi militants. Tehran said it was a government liaison office and called for the release of the five, along with compensation for damages.

The dossier also details Iran's role in providing Iraqi fighters with the "explosively formed penetrator" devices that can pierce the armor of Abrams tanks with nearly molten-hot charges. One intelligence official said the U.S. is "fairly comfortable" that it knows with some precision the origin of those Iranian-made explosives.

While traveling in Europe on Friday, Gates said that serial numbers and markings on explosives used in Iraq provide "pretty good" evidence that Iran is providing either weapons or technology for militants there. Gates did not how the U.S. knows that, and officials in Washington declined comment.

A senior U.S. government official said Saturday that members of Congress were shown proof in December. "I'm convinced from what I've seen that the Iranians are supplying and are giving assistance to the people in Iraq who are killing American soldiers," said independent Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut.

The evidence in the dossier also includes what is known about Iranian efforts to train Iraqis in making bombs, using firearms and other military skills. But officials described internal disagreement about how closely Iranians can be linked to the training: Is there an Iranian in a classroom or some other setting showing Iraqis how to place and detonate roadside bombs? That, the official said, is less clear.

Analysts at the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Office of the National Intelligence Director and elsewhere have been double- and triple-checking the information to ensure it is well supported.

Officials said that is particularly the case when the material comes from sources with agendas. For instance, groups such as the Mujahedeen Khalq, which advocates for the overthrow of Iran's rulers, have provided some useful information to the United States in the past, but officials said material from them and other similar sources must be handled carefully.

The vigorous fact-checking brings up a recurring problem: the precise nature of Iran's actions is often murky, but the intelligence must be solid. After mistakes on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, U.S. officials recognize there is skepticism about U.S. intelligence claims.

Associated Press writers Lolita C. Baldor and Pauline Jelinek contributed to this report.

February 12

LONDON (AFP) - The government has appeared to back US claims that Iran had supplied weapons and explosives to Shia militants in neighbouring Iraq for use against coalition forces.

Asked whether Tony Blair supported the US's allegations, his official spokesman said the prime minister had long been on record as having concerns about Tehran's supply of weapons to insurgents.

"Those concerns have not gone away at all," he added. "We certainly believe that if the Iranian government wanted to, it could address these concerns but we don't see any signs that it is."

He added: "We keep finding the weaponry which we don't believe to be sourced from anywhere else."

An anonymous group of senior US officials showed journalists in Baghdad at the weekend what they said was proof that Iranian agents have smuggled weapons across the border, including types of roadside bombs.

The improvised explosive devices have killed 170 US and coalition troops since May 2004, the officials said. The Iranian authorities on Monday said the claims were "without foundation" and propaganda against the Islamic republic.

In February 2005, Blair told a parliamentary committee there was "no doubt at all" that Iran sponsored terrorism abroad.

In October the same year, he suggested Iran or Iran-backed Hezbollah militia were responsible for a spate of attacks on British troops in southern Iraq and coalition forces elsewhere in the country.

He then warned that Iran would be a "real threat" to world security if it continued its belligerent stance towards Israel after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for the Jewish state to be "wiped off the map".

On a visit to the United Arab Emirates in December last year, Blair called for moderate Arab and Gulf states to form an alliance against Iran because of its support for extremism, amid heightened talk of military action.

And just this month, he accused Iran of "deliberately fomenting sectarianism and conflict" in the Middle East on top of its defiance of the international community over its disputed nuclear programme.

Iran rejects U.S. charges on arming Iraq

By ALI AKBAR DAREINI, Associated Press Writer

TEHRAN, Iran - Iran on Monday rejected U.S. accusations that the highest levels of Iranian leadership have armed Shiite militants in Iraq with armor-piercing roadside bombs.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in a televised interview that his country was opposed to conflict and bloodshed in Iraq and that problems in Iraq should be solved with dialogue, not by force.

"There should be a court to prove the case and to verify the case. The position of our government ... is also the same. We are opposed to any kind of conflict in Iraq," Ahmadinejad told ABC's "Good Morning America."

The highly sophisticated weapons are known as "explosively formed penetrators," or EFPs, and have killed more than 170 troops from the U.S.-led coalition. Three senior U.S. military officials in Baghdad said Sunday the "machining process" used in the construction of the deadly bombs had been traced to Iran.

But Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini said Iran's top leaders were not intervening in Iraq and considered "any intervention in Iraq's internal affairs as a weakening of the popular Iraqi government, and we are opposed to that."

"Such accusations cannot be relied upon or be presented as evidence. The United States has a long history in fabricating evidence. Such charges are unacceptable," Hosseini told reporters in Tehran.

The Bush administration is confident the report about the weapons flow from Iran into Iraq is accurate, spokesman Tony Snow said Monday.

Asked directly if the White House is confident that the weaponry is coming on the approval of the Iranian government, Snow said: "Yes."

He also played down the report.

"I don't think there's a change of tone on our part," Snow said. "I think that there have been attempts, with all due respect, in the press to try to whip this up — is the administration going after Iran."

"This is providing — presenting evidence to the effect that there's been the shipment of weaponry, lethal weaponry into Iraq, some of it of Iranian providence," Snow added. "And this is something that we think if the president of Iran wants to put a stop to it, we wish him luck and hope he'll do it real soon."

The U.S. military presentation in Baghdad on Sunday was the result of weeks of preparation and revisions as U.S. officials put together a package of material to support the Bush administration's claims of Iranian intercession on behalf of militant Iraqis fighting American forces.

The experts, who spoke to a large gathering of reporters on condition that they not be further identified, said the supply trail began with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, which also is accused of arming the Hezbollah guerrilla army in Lebanon. The officials said the EFP weapon was first tested there.

The U.S. officials in Baghdad claimed the EFPs, as well as Iranian-made mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades, have been supplied to "rogue elements" of the Mahdi Army militia of anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is a key backer of Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Many key government figures and members of Iraq's Shiite political leadership have deep ties to Iran, having spent decades there in exile during Saddam Hussein's rule. Iran has repeatedly denied that it has armed the Shiite militias in the neighboring country.

Ahmadinejad said Iraq's lack of security also was a "disadvantage" to Iran.

"Our position regarding Iraq is very clear. We are asking for peace. We're asking for security. And we will be sad to see people get killed, no matter who they are," he told ABC.

In Tehran, Hosseini also addressed another contentious issue between his country and Washington — Iran's nuclear program.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman said Iran was ready to negotiate with the international community but would not agree to the precondition that it suspend uranium enrichment first.

Ahmadinejad on Sunday also vowed to continue moving forward with enrichment but — in a softening of his usual fiery rhetoric — said Tehran was open to dialogue.

The U.S. and its allies accuse Iran of secretly developing atomic weapons, but Iran has repeatedly denied the charges, saying its program is solely for peaceful purposes.

In December, the U.N. Security Council imposed limited sanctions on Iran for its refusal to roll back its nuclear program and suspend uranium enrichment. Iran faces more sanctions later this month if it does not halt enrichment.

Snow said Iran "ought to be able to have nuclear power without having the capacity to develop nuclear weapons."

Associated Press Writer Steven R. Hurst in Baghdad, Iraq, contributed to this report.

US claims against Iran: why now?

By Paul Reynolds

World affairs correspondent, BBC news website

In October 2005, the then British ambassador to Iraq William Patey told reporters in London that Iran had been supplying technology used to kill British troops in Basra. He said he had complained to the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad about it.

The claim was that elements connected to the Shia militia in the south, the Mehdi army, had been using specially shaped charges, in which the force of the explosion is directed narrowly in one direction, thereby enabling it to penetrate armoured vehicles. No evidence was produced, other than a suggestion that the Iranian-supported Lebanese group Hezbollah had also used such charges, so the common origin had to be Iran. US officials have made similar claims over the last year. General George Casey, the then US commander in Iraq, said so in June 2006.

Evidence

In a briefing in Baghdad on Sunday, US military and intelligence officers finally laid out their evidence. The question has to be asked as to why it has taken at least 14 months for this to happen. So, why now?

If you take the claims at face value, the reason is that only now has the evidence become substantial enough to be made public. The number of attacks is said to have grown as well, so that is another explanation put forward for going public now. A trend has been identified about which information should be given.

According to this position, there is nothing sinister about the timing of the claim. It is the result of an evidence-based process which has only now reached the stage of producing a result. And after all, reporters have been asking for this evidence for months. There are other possibilities as well.

Softening up?

For a start, the fear among some is that the US is softening up world opinion for an attack on Iran. Such an attack would be aimed at Iran's nuclear facilities. At the moment, the US lacks a *casus belli* and by claiming that Iran is responsible for killing USA troops, it could be laying the groundwork for a 'self-defence' justification, according to this theory.

The new chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator John Rockefeller said recently: "To be quite honest, I'm a little concerned that it's Iraq again."

There is also the fact that the US is launching its 'surge' policy of moving extra troops into Baghdad. These claims are being made against Shia militias, including the Mehdi army, one of the main targets of the latest policy. Blaming Shia Iran for supporting Iraqi Shia militias makes it easier for the US to sell that policy at home and abroad.

Blaming others

Then there is the old tactic of blaming someone else for your own problems. Many people will not distinguish between the Shia militias that Iran is said to supply - and which have ties to the Iraqi government - and the Sunni insurgents who have been the cause of much of the violence.

The allegedly Iranian supplied bombs are said to have caused the deaths of 170 American soldiers, but overall 2497 soldiers have been killed in hostile incidents, most of them at hands of the Sunnis. The claim serves the purpose of helping to lay the blame for the whole insurgency at Iran's door. There are also other possible reasons for this timing.

Council deadline

The UN Security Council has laid down that Iran must suspend its enrichment of uranium by 21 February. If it does not, and if the International Atomic Energy Agency confirms this, the resolution says that further economic sanctions will be considered.

The officials said such an assertion [that Iran was the source of components for the explosive devices] was an inference based on general intelligence assessments. The US is preparing to argue for tougher sanctions, so making claims against Iran over Iraq might help it in its arguments that Iran is a threat.

On the wider front, the Bush administration is engaged in a campaign against the Iranian government in order to isolate it and eventually maybe see its end under internal pressure from the Iranian people. The latest claims against Iran could be a part of that campaign.

The claims

What of the claims themselves? They are based on physical evidence, from bombs and their effects. The bombs now even have their own name and acronym - explosively formed penetrators or EFPs. Previously they had been lumped in the generalised description of IEDs - improvised explosive devices. The implication is that now they are less improvised and more planned. They are said to be provided by Iran in kit form and to be smuggled across the often-open border.

However the officials who presented the evidence could not make a direct link to Iran.

"The officials said such an assertion was an inference based on general intelligence assessments," stated the New York Times. They did make much of the detention in Irbil of five Iranians who were said to be members of the Quds force of the Iranian revolutionary Guards. The Quds (the word means Jerusalem) force was said by the US officials to be controlled directly by the "highest levels of the Iranian government". That last statement is significant in that the US is now making a charge against the Iranian government itself, not just against its agents.

Scepticism

Against the inference that this all comes from Iran is the concept that Iraqis themselves would be capable of copying a design and therefore do not need to get bombs from Iran. And there have been a number of news reports over the last year expressing scepticism, even among military personnel, about the link to Iran.

The Washington Post reported last October that British troops in the south doubted the claim.

A year ago, the London Times said that British officers in Basra had stopped making any such claim, saying only that the technology matched bomb-making found elsewhere in the Middle East, including Lebanon and Syria.

Bush tries to convince world no plans for Iran war **By Steve Holland**

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President George W. Bush is trying to convince the world he has no intention of invading Iran, but is running into skeptics who see U.S. charges that Iran is shipping bombs into Iraq as a step toward conflict.

Having ordered two aircraft carriers to the Gulf and accused Iranians of providing Iraqi militants bombs that have killed 170 Americans, Bush and his top aides are struggling to tamp down talk that a new war is brewing.

Bush himself prompted the talk in a January 10 speech outlining his reworked Iraq strategy, by saying "Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops. We will disrupt the attacks on our forces."

A debate has since raged over whether he has an attack on Iran in mind. "Next Stop Iran?" asked The Economist magazine's cover this week over a picture of a U.S. military aircraft in flight.

The White House sees tensions with Iran over its nuclear ambitions as a separate issue from Tehran's alleged bomb supplies in Iraq.

Bush wants the nuclear issue resolved diplomatically, but has authorized U.S. forces to capture or kill Iranians involved in attacks on Americans or Iraqis inside Iraq.

"We're not getting ready for war on Iran, but what we are doing is we're protecting our own people. And we're going to do it. And we've made it clear that that is going to be a priority," White House spokesman Tony Snow said on Monday.

REPEAT OF 2003?

Democrats say they fear a repeat of 2002 and 2003, when Bush made a case for war against Iraq based on weapons of mass destruction that were never found.

"That's how we got into the mess in Iraq. That's why some of us supported those resolutions because of doctored information. So I'm very skeptical based on recent past history about this administration leading us in that direction," Connecticut Democratic Sen. Christopher Dodd (news, bio, voting record), a presidential hopeful, said on CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday.

When Bush hears arguments like that, he sees a political attack from Democrats who want their party to claim the White House in 2008.

"I guess my reaction to all the noise about 'he wants to go to war' -- first of all I don't understand the tactics. I guess I would say it's political," Bush told C-SPAN on Monday.

The White House says some of the war talk is being driven by a news media hungry for the next big story.

"I don't think there's a change of tone on our part. I think that there have been attempts, with all due respect, in the press, to try to whip this up -- 'Is the administration going after Iran?'" said Snow.

Anthony Cordesman, a Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said the Iran war debate appeared to be driven by Democrats looking for an issue and neoconservatives who would like to see regime change in Tehran.

"It's quite clear from the content that they are trying to stop the flow of money and arms (into Iraq), not trying to provide a war with Iran. If anything, the signals are more about deterrence than anything else," he said.

The Bush administration is trying to walk a fine line between threatening Iran over its alleged bomb supplies in Iraq, which Tehran denies, and underscoring its reliance on diplomacy over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

On the issue of Iranian bombs in Iraq, U.S. officials are adamant that the evidence is true. "The Iranians are up to their eyeballs in this activity," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

(Additional reporting by Arshad Mohammed)

February 13

Pace questions whether Iran arming Iraq **By CHRIS BRUMMITT, Associated Press Writer**

JAKARTA, Indonesia - The top U.S. military officer said Tuesday the discovery that roadside bombs in Iraq contained material made in Iran does not necessarily mean the Iranian government was involved in supplying insurgents.

The comments by Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called into question assertions by three senior U.S. military officials in Baghdad on Sunday who said the highest levels of Iranian government were responsible for arming Shiite militants in Iraq with the bombs, blamed for the deaths of more than 170 troops in the U.S.-led coalition.

White House spokesman Tony Snow said Monday he was confident the weaponry was coming with the approval of the Iranian government.

Pace told reporters in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, that U.S. forces hunting militant networks in Iraq that produced roadside bombs had arrested Iranians and some of the materials used in the devices were made in Iran.

"That does not translate that the Iranian government per se, for sure, is directly involved in doing this," Pace said. "What it does say is that things made in Iran are being used in Iraq to kill coalition soldiers."

On Monday, Pace said he had no firm knowledge that the Iranian government had sanctioned the arming of the insurgents.

"It is clear that Iranians are involved, and it's clear that materials from Iran are involved, but I would not say by what I know that the Iranian government clearly knows or is complicit," Pace told the Voice of America.

Iran denied it gave sophisticated weapons to militants to attack U.S. forces.

"Such accusations cannot be relied upon or be presented as evidence. The United States has a long history in fabricating evidence. Such charges are unacceptable," Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told reporters in Tehran.

The Joint Chiefs chairman is the senior military adviser to the president, but he commands no troops and is not in the chain of command that runs from the president to the secretary of defense to commanders in the field.

Iraq says closes borders with Syria, Iran

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Iraq's government said on Tuesday it had closed its borders with Syria and Iran, and extended the hours of a night curfew in Baghdad under a U.S.-backed security plan to rein in violence in the capital.

The measures ordered by Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki were announced on Iraqiya state television by Lieutenant General Abboud Qanbar, the Iraqi commander who is leading the security offensive in Baghdad.

He said the borders would be closed for 72 hours.

The measure extends Baghdad's night vehicle curfew of 11 p.m.-6 a.m. to 8 p.m.-6 a.m. Baghdad's international airport, which has been closed down in security operations in the past, will not be affected.

U.S. officials accuse non-Arab, Shi'ite Iran of funding and training Iraqi militants attacking U.S. forces in Iraq. American and Iraqi officials have accused Syria of not doing enough to stop alleged foreign fighters from crossing into Iraq.

On Monday bombings in popular markets in Baghdad killed at least 77 people and maimed scores.