

Blogger on trial in Egypt

By **NADIA ABOU EL-MAGD**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAIRO, Egypt — An Egyptian blogger went on trial Thursday on charges of insulting Islam and causing sectarian strife with his Internet writings. Egypt's first prosecution of a blogger came as Washington has backed away from pressuring its Mideast ally to improve its human rights record and bring democratic reform.

Abdel Kareem Nabil often denounced Islamic authorities and criticized Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on his Arabic-language blog. He has been in detention since November and faces up to nine years in prison if convicted.

Egypt has arrested a string of pro-democracy bloggers over the past year, sparking condemnation from human rights groups.

Nabil's trial in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria began two days after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Mubarak, seeking support for a new American strategy on calming violence in Iraq.

But unlike past visits to Egypt when she pressed demands for greater democracy, Rice made no reference to reform, instead praising the two countries' "important strategic relationship — one that we value greatly."

In Thursday's court session, Nabil was charged with inciting sedition, insulting Islam, harming national unity and insulting the president, a court official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of court rules.

Defense attorneys asked for time to review the indictment and the trial was adjourned until Jan. 25.

His lawyer, Radwa Sayed Ahmed, said Nabil had been held in solitary confinement, forbidden visits from his family and lawyers. In court Thursday, "he didn't look good," she told the Associated Press.

Amnesty International and media watchdog Reporters Without Borders have criticized the arrests as restricting freedom of expression. The Paris-based media watchdog has included Egypt in "Enemies of the Internet," a report issued in November.

Iran is ready, Ahmadinejad warns

By **ALI AKBAR DAREINI**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

TEHRAN, Iran — President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lashed back over the U.S. military buildup in the Gulf, saying Thursday that Iran is ready for any possibility in its standoff with the West over its nuclear program.

The president made clear he was not backing down in his tough rhetoric toward the United States, despite criticism at home. At the same time, his top national security official, Ali Larijani, sharply denounced U.S. policy in Iraq, accusing Washington of fueling Shiite-Sunni hatreds.

Washington has accused Iran of backing militants fueling Iraq's violence and has tried to rally its Arab allies in isolating Tehran. The Iraq crisis has increased tensions between the U.S. and Iran amid the dispute over Iran's nuclear program, which Washington says aims to produce nuclear weapons.



Associated Press

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, holds a sword as he greets people in the southwestern provincial capital of Ahvaz in Iran on Jan. 2. Ahmadinejad told a crowd that Iran had humiliated the United States in the past and would do so again.

The United States sent an aircraft carrier, the USS Stennis, to the Gulf this week — the second to deploy in the region — a buildup that Defense Secretary Robert Gates said was intended to impress on Iran that the four-year war in Iraq has not made America vulnerable.

In an apparent reaction to the deployment, Ahmadinejad

vowed Thursday that Iran would not back down over its nuclear program, which Tehran says is being developed only to produce energy.

"Today, with the grace of God, we have gone through the arduous passes and we are ready for anything in this path," state-run television quoted the Iranian leader as saying.

The U.N. Security Council recently imposed limited sanctions to punish Iran for defying a resolution demanding that it suspend uranium enrichment, a process that can produce material to fuel nuclear reactors or, at purer concentrations, the core of nuclear weapons.

In Paris, the head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, said he was concerned the sanctions could escalate Iran's standoff with Western powers.

"I don't think sanctions will resolve the issue . . . Sanctions in my view could lead to escalation on both sides," he warned.

Gates on Iran

Says Iranians are "overplaying their hand"

MANAMA, Bahrain —

The Iranians are "overplaying their hand" on the world stage in a belief that setbacks in Iraq have weakened the United States, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday.

He said that now is not the time to negotiate with Iran because the U.S. lacks leverage but that talks probably would make sense at some point.

In addition, American raids inside Iraq have netted Iranian prisoners, and the U.S. is sending a second aircraft carrier and missiles to the region.

— Associated Press

Syria open to talks?

Retired Israeli diplomat says yes.

NETANYA, Israel —

Syria is serious about resuming peace talks with Israel, and during last summer's Lebanon war even proposed holding a secret emergency meeting with Israeli officials in Europe, a retired Israeli diplomat said Thursday.

Israel's leaders quickly distanced themselves from the unofficial talks held by former Foreign Ministry director general Alon Liel and a Syrian-American businessman. Liel, going public for the first time Thursday, said he briefed government officials every step of the way.

"Our testimony is that it is very clear to us that Assad wants to talk," said Liel, referring to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

— Associated Press

Israeli official: Timing right for Palestine peace deal

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NETANYA, Israel — Israel could wrap up a final peace deal with Palestinians within two years but the international climate for such talks will not remain favorable for long, a senior Israeli defense official said Thursday.

Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh has formulated a new peace plan together with Defense Minister Amir Peretz of the moderate Labor Party, a junior partner in the centrist coalition. He is one of several leading officials, including Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, to recently articulate new ideas for re-energizing peace efforts.

He appealed for urgent action, saying the timing was favorable

because moderate Arab states want to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We have an opportunity, but I don't know for how long will it last," Sneh said at the Netanya Academic College.

Sneh said a peace deal is still possible even though previous rounds collapsed over explosive issues such as the fate of Jerusalem and Jewish settlements.

Nearly four years ago, Israel and the Palestinians accepted the "road map" peace plan. But it foundered soon after it was presented. Both sides have failed to carry out obligations that were to be fulfilled before negotiations on a final deal could be launched.

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