

The following is a translation of the VOA TV Persian program "NewsTalk," which was broadcast via satellite on September 13, 2007 at 1930 UTC.

TRANSLATION BEGINS HERE

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

...and there is no harm in talking about it, we now turn our focus to commentary and analysis of the day's news about Iran and the Iranian people. Stay with the Voice of America [VOA].

[Music]

[On-screen graphic: NewsTalk]

[Male voice]

NewsTalk every night from VOA. A closer look at events in Iran and around the world.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Greetings to our dear viewers in Iran and anywhere else around the world watching NewsTalk. It is 11:00 p.m. in Tehran, corresponding to 3:30 p.m. in Washington, D.C. We will be with you during the hour ahead through midnight, Tehran time, as you are with VOA.

[Music]

[On-screen graphic: News]

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

In the first minutes of NewsTalk, we go to our own Hamideh Aramideh for today's news headlines. Greetings to you Hamideh.

[Hamideh Aramideh]

Greetings to you dear Mr. Chalangi.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Dear Hamideh, I wanted to let you know it was okay that you did not bring any Sekanjebin [mint syrup] for me from your trip.

[Laughter]

Mr. Sobhani from his Central-Asia trip brought me a box of mint syrup.

[Crosstalk]

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Of course she has just gotten back and has come directly to the studio here. She, as agreed, would bring us some mint syrup next time for sure.

[Hamideh Aramideh]

But of course. So please do not forget about me Mr. Sobhani. After the next trip for sure.

[Laughter]

[Crosstalk]

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

This gentleman here who is our other guest tonight, along with our viewers, are all waiting for the latest news. Please go ahead.

[Hamideh Aramideh]

Gladly so, with thanks to you all.

Hello again to our viewers and listeners of this broadcast.

China has demanded that Iran cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency and answer fundamental questions related to Tehran's nuclear program. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson also welcomed Iran's agreement last month with the International Atomic Energy Agency to answer questions about its past nuclear work within the next few months. The spokeswoman made the comments after Iranian Interior Minister Hojataoll-Islam Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi arrived in Beijing on Thursday for talks on the nuclear issue.

The Israeli Foreign Minister said Thursday that the UN should impose tougher sanctions against Iran to try to stop its nuclear program. In an interview with Israel radio, Tzipi Livni said the two previous sanction resolutions by UN against Iran are not enough. The foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, also said private groups and businesses should stop dealing with Iran, despite possible economic losses.

But Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani said Wednesday that Tehran will not stop sensitive nuclear work. Iran has also warned that more sanctions could jeopardize its cooperation with the UN nuclear agency. A senior military official in Iraq says a rocket made in Iran was used two days ago during an attack on U.S. military installations near Baghdad. On Thursday, Major General Kevin Bergner said, "The attackers used a 240-millimeter rocket, which is a weapon that these groups have received from Iranian sources in the past." According to him, the rocket came from the western Baghdad district of Rasheed that is a stronghold of the Mahdi Army militia led by the radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

Iran has denied on many occasions U.S. accusations that it provides weapons and training to Iraqi militia groups. General Bergner confirmed news reports that coalition forces are opening a base along the Iran-Iraq border to stop the flow of weapons and other aid to such groups. White House officials say President Bush in his address tonight will announce that the number of U.S. forces in Iraq will be decreased by 30,000. Democrats do not consider this number to be sufficient. It is expected that Mr. Bush will endorse General David Petraeus' recommendation to bring home a portion of U.S. troops by July 2008 if the conditions are suitable.

Senate Democrats will try again next week by offering amendments to military appropriations bills to cut troop numbers and put an end to four years of war in Iraq. One amendment would limit the role of U.S. forces to battling terrorism and training Iraqi security forces.

On the other hand, a roadside bomb has killed an important Sunni tribal leader who was cooperating with U.S. troops fighting al-Qaeda insurgents in Iraq. Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Risha and two bodyguards died in the attack near his home in Ramadi, the capital of al-Anbar province. President Bush met Abu Risha and other tribal leaders during a highly symbolic trip to Anbar province last week.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte met with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf at his official residence in Islamabad today. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said the men discussed bilateral relations, counterterrorism and regional issues. During this two-day trip to Pakistan, Negroponte has praised Mr. Musharraf's government as a key ally in the

fight against terrorism. Mr. Negroponte was expected to also meet with Pakistan's Prime Minister and members of the judiciary.

Meanwhile Pakistan's army claims to have killed 30 militants in a tribal area near the Afghan border. A Pakistani army spokesperson said the battle took place at night in the south of Waziristan when insurgents attacked an army post. During the fight two soldiers also lost their lives.

The U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan says its forces have killed about 45 insurgents in the country's south. This brings up the number of recent casualties in Afghanistan to 58. The coalition says ground troops called in air support Wednesday after their patrol of foreign and Afghan troops was attacked by Taliban fighters in Uruzgan province. In a similar exchange, NATO and Afghan forces killed about 12 Taliban fighters in the southern province of Zabul late Wednesday.

In a separate incident, officials say a Bangladeshi aid worker was shot dead by unknown gunmen in the northeastern province of Badakshan. Also, police killed a suspected suicide bomber in Helmand province. And finally, the main political party in Japan will hold an election on September 23 to find a replacement for Shinzo Abe. Mr. Abe was hospitalized a day after announcing his resignation due to extreme exhaustion and intestinal pain. During his resignation announcement on Wednesday, Mr. Abe did not mention anything about his health. He told parliament that he resigned because the country needed a leader who could help in Japan's fight against terrorism.

Analysts believe Abe was quitting to pave the way for the ruling and the opposition parties to work together to approve the extension of Tokyo's naval mission in support of the U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party announced that whoever wins the election would certainly become the prime minister. Taro Aso, the LDP secretary-general, and Yasuo Fukuda, former chief cabinet secretary, are the main candidates to replace Mr. Abe.

Thank you for you being with us.

[VOA video promo]

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

While the hand amputations of two Iranians for robbery in the city of Mashhad is still reverberating throughout international media, the caretaker of Industries and Mines Ministry Ali Akbar Mehrabian returning from his trip from Damascus announced Iran would invest \$10 billion more in Syria. In light of this and the several billion dollars worth of Iranian investment in United Arab Emirates, the transfer of capital out of Iran by the Islamic government sector to Dubai and other emirates is taking on a new dimension.

This happens as, according to reports, five residents of Sistan and Baluchestan province committed suicide because of poverty. Meanwhile, a postal worker hanged himself in Tehran's Ressalat Avenue due to pressure from his government bosses. Finally, over 700 political, social, and cultural activists in Iran signed a statement demanding the release of Soheil Asefi, the imprisoned Iranian journalist and other young people jailed in various prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

We now review and analyze the latest news from Iran with Dr. Sohrab Sobhani, an international affairs expert, who is here with us in the studio. We also have Ms. Elahe Boghrat, a freelance journalist from Berlin who will participate in our discussion on the phone.

Welcome Dr. Sobhani. Before reviewing the news we mentioned in the introduction, I would like to talk about several Washington Post articles that appeared today. The overall assessment of the articles was that the possibility of new sanctions against Iran is real, and the possibility of European countries joining those sanctions is also real.

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

That is entirely true. The articles published today in the Washington Post, Mr. Charlangi, were all in relation to Iraq. Throughout these articles, U.S. military officials, members of Congress, and U.S. politicians all have described Iran as an agent of instability in the region, particularly in Iraq.

Along those lines, the U.S. government has gotten together with the Europeans to hold an international conference around September 21 with England, France, Germany, and even Russia and China in order to discuss ways to isolate Iran. Economic sanctions against the Iranian government will be discussed with a special focus on financial restrictions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

This upcoming gathering and coordination would make this series of sanctions even more restrictive than the previous ones, would it not?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

It appears that the U.S. government has decided to continue on the diplomatic route. This diplomacy, however, would be concentrated on isolating the Iranian government and applying economic sanctions. When it comes to the Revolutionary Guards Corps, since there is a belief that it is them who are causing trouble in Iraq, the goal will be to find ways to cut off their influence by putting financial pressure on the Guards' financial bodies.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

As you know, Dr. Sobhani, these days there are still a lot of discussions going on around the testimonies by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker on Iraq. We did go over Tehran's reactions to these testimonies in our broadcast yesterday. My question to you is this: In the U.S., what is the overall relationship between the administration in power and the armed forces? Who decides what the armed forces should do, and who makes the final decision about that? Does it depend at all which one of the political parties is in power? Or does the army answer to another organ altogether?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

Historically speaking, the very first military personality who entered United States politics was the first president of the country, George Washington—himself a General. However, the U.S. Constitution is very clear on the point that civilians should be in charge of the U.S. armed forces. What this means, first and foremost, is that a civilian should be in charge of the Defense Department, and military leaders must get their orders from this civilian leadership. Secondly, and apart from this, U.S. Congress has various committees. One of these committees is the powerful Armed Services Committee. Therefore, military oversight is applied by both the Executive and the Legislative branches of the government.

Although oversight is exercised from two different fronts, the final say on declaration of war has been left to the President. However, this authority is contingent upon his first receiving permission from the Congress.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

We now say hello to Ms. Elahe Boghrat in Berlin with this question: Mr. Sobhani just pointed out the unity between the U.S. and the Europeans over more stringent sanctions against Iran. However, reports say that the new French proposal has been met with opposition from Germany. What are your observations?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

That is right. As Mr. Sobhani said, the five UN permanent members, along with Germany, on September 21 are going to start their deliberations about the third wave of sanctions against Iran. It was announced today that French President Nicholas Sarkozy had proposed the European Union not wait for the UN Security Council resolution on the matter and go ahead with its own strict sanctions against Iran. This proposal met with resistance from German political and financial officials.

The French believe that if the goal is to force Iran into changing its position [on the nuclear matter] without using force, that has to be done now when there is still time. According to the French, the sanctions so far have shown to have little impact and more force should be put behind the sanctions. Otherwise, as the Iranian regime continues to report weekly progress on its nuclear program, there will come a time that military confrontation will be inevitable. The German government and financial institutions may be worried about their interests in Iran now, the French logic goes on, but they would lose everything if there were to be a military campaign against Iran. The French believe sanctions could bring the Iranian regime to its knees.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Are you saying, Ms. Boghrat, that the Europeans are also convinced that long-term sanctions will have no effect on Iran?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

That is certainly the case. Whatever happens, the responsibility lies squarely with the Islamic Republic. Using either military or economic pressures, the U.S. and Europe will not allow the Islamic Republic to get its hands on the atomic bomb. The French say to themselves—with Russia leaning back in its seat at the UN, waiting to veto any serious sanctions against the Iranian regime—that the EU would be better off going its own way and proceeding with its own sanctions independent of the UN as soon as possible.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Vladimir Putin has recently visited the United Arab Emirates, while you were traveling in Central Asia. [Laughter] My point is that Russia seems to be aligning itself with the concern of the Arab countries south of the Persian Gulf about Iran's nuclear program. It seems Russia is going to distance itself from Iran even more in the foreseeable future.

Do you consider this to be an accurate analysis?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

I believe the only country in the world that supports the Islamic Republic at the moment would be China. Russia too is coming to the conclusion that it cannot negotiate with Iran from the position of trust, as whatever they hear from Iran seems to be a lie. Russia after all may be realizing that a nuclear Iran would be a danger to Russia. That could explain the rift which seems to have recently appeared between Moscow and Tehran. That was my first point.

My second point is that Mr. Putin seems to be paving the way for Russia's investment in the Persian Gulf region—especially in areas where natural gas is found. This is perhaps because Russian oil and gas companies seem to have adopted a more Western philosophy while Mr. Putin is placing economic considerations above all other political concerns. Mr. Putin's trips abroad these days have a more financial tone to them than a political one.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

My question to you Ms. Boghrat is this: the Iranian government has publicized the fact that IAEA Director Dr. Mohammad ElBaradei opposes the policy outlined by the European Union against Iran's nuclear program. How much is this point, which the Iranian regime has highlighted, in line with the realities on the ground in Europe?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

It is true that ElBaradei left the European negotiation session in protest. However, the Iranian regime has been spreading lies about what Mr. ElBaradei has actually been saying. Mr. ElBaradei has never said that the Iranian government has been in compliance with the IAEA, as has been portrayed by Iranian official media. On the contrary, Mr. ElBaradei has stated that Iran has not lived up to UN resolutions to stop its enrichment

program, and that there are some ambiguities that the Iranian government must clarify. The additional time requested by Mr. ElBaradei is actually aimed at allowing Iran to respond to these uncertainties. What upset Mr. ElBaradei was the Europeans' assertion that waiting on Iran until November would be playing into the hands of that regime as it tries to buy time. The regime, as the European position goes, has been vying for time by raising some sort of obstacle each and every week. Mr. ElBaradei was upset because Europeans were against giving any time to Iran and went on to issue a rather terse statement at the end of their gathering which conflicted with Mr. ElBaradei's views.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Judging by your statements, could the conclusion be made that Europeans are going out of their way to be unified with U.S. on this issue?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

There is no doubt about that. It certainly is the case and other countries will undoubtedly cooperate with US and Europeans on this issue.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

I have heard this news, Dr. Sobhani—as you may have heard it too—that a mailman has attempted to hang himself in front of the post office on Ressalat Avenue in Tehran. This man, named Nemat, is a mailman who has been under a lot of pressure from his supervisors. He then tries to kill himself as a result. In a press conference, his son has said that his father has been under a lot of pressure because, well, he has been a mailman. He has also been the family's sole breadwinner. It has been said that he has to put gas in the motorcycle he would use to deliver the mail with money from his own pocket, despite the high price of gas. His son has said that his father has always been a self-loathing person. "He would hide his problems and internalize them. He would never let us know what had been bothering him."

The father then gets some rope and attempts to hang himself before the post office on Ressalat Avenue. Fortunately, people rescued this decent mailman, as all post office workers are decent folks. On one hand we have this news. On the other hand we have received news that the head of Industries and Mines Ministry, Mr. Ali Akbar Mehrabian has traveled to Syria and returned to Iran after a couple of days to announce the good news—we do not know to whom—that Iran would make a five-year

investment in Syria worth 10 billion dollars. It is understood that allied countries do assist each other. However, as the saying goes, charity begins at home.

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]
That is correct.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]
If that is the state of affairs, what is going to happen to the saying I just mentioned?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]
As you pointed out, Mr. Chalangi, these two reports are actually connected, despite the fact that they may seem unrelated. Without a doubt, if the Iranian government has 10 billion dollars to invest while creating a 200 million dollar joint account, and at the same time is planning 10 billion-dollar investments, a post office worker should not be forced to hang himself out of life's hardships. Why? Because there must not have been any problem with gas as that money could have been used to build refineries. Those refineries would then be able to satisfy internal demand for gas. That is my first point.

My other point is this: There is news out of Sistan and Baluchestan province that unemployment is really bad down there. Meanwhile we hear that China has been experiencing problems selling its manufactured goods around the world. Why not bringing that investment money out of Syria and invest it in Sistan and Baluchestan province and build factories. These could be toy factories. Presently China has 40% of world's toy market. Why should Iran not do something like that? Iran can do exactly the same work with higher quality. However, the necessary investment is heading to Syria instead. Why is that? The Iranian people must ask their leaders that exact same question.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]
I want to ask Ms. Boghrat the same question: Are the people of a country subject to the rulers of their own country, or should they be subjugated to the wishes and interests of their country's allies? As Dr. Sobhani pointed out, there is the news that five people have committed suicide in Sistan and Baluchestan province as reported on Mrs. Fatemeh Rajabi's Web site (who is the wife of the Justice Minister). She believes that poverty is not the root

cause of these suicides, but the programs shown on Iranian television which venerate affluence and wealth are discouraging to people, causing depression among them which leads to their committing suicide. That is her commentary on the matter.

What do you think?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

Once the government of the Unseen Imam feels that it has mastered all matters of governing effectively, it would be justified in expressing its views on the subject of suicide. You need to understand that suicide is a complicated phenomenon. It exists all over the world and will always be there in the future. However, when a country such as Iran scores so high on suicide rates, it would make any government in the world to think about finding out the causes of such phenomenon. As you mentioned in your reports earlier, the suicide cases you reported on definitely have roots in socio-economical conditions of the people.

This type of suicide with economic roots should be classified as the same kind of suicide women used to commit. Women used to set themselves on fire in reaction to having so few social rights, or for having no control over their standing in the family, or for not having any say in the custody of their children in cases of divorce.

These suicides should be included with that large wave of suicides among women, particularly in the remote provinces. Regarding your comments about the Islamic Republic investments abroad, you need to realize that the Islamic Republic's government is doing so to buy friends. Using investment money as a sort of bribery, the government attempts to buy itself allies among anti-US governments in the region. It goes without saying that those countries are not going to turn down the money. They take advantage of it. But I assure you if it comes to choose between the Islamic Republic and the Western countries, the same government will choose European countries and the U.S. It does not matter how much such countries claim to be anti-American. Regardless of how much Syria may sympathize with Iran, that fact remains the same.

Syria has demonstrated this fact in the past by its secret negotiations with Israel in order to align itself with U.S. positions and compromise on various fronts. Therefore, I am convinced that the Iranian government is spending

its people's treasure on friendships and alliances which will have no benefit for it at the end.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

My question to you, Mr. Sobhani is whether you agree with Ms. Boghrat's view that friendship with governments such as Syria would be useless, as Syria would switch sides as soon as the going gets tough. Another such example is the UAE where, according to reports, over 120 billion dollars have been transferred during the past year.

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

Perhaps this view should be inspected on per-country basis. Mr. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela perhaps is not going to turn to the U.S. However, it is almost certain that a country such as Abu Dhabi—the most important of the Emirates—would turn away from Iran towards the U.S. at the first opportunity. Perhaps the government of Syria would bow to pressures from both Europe and the U.S. So it would all depend on the government of the country.

There is no doubt that at the end of the day, each country will place its own interests above anything else, including those of the Islamic Republic. However, as Ms. Boghrat pointed out, the real question is why this investment is not made in Iran. The Iranian people must ask this question; Iranian newspapers must ask this question; the so-called democratic parliament has to ask the government exactly this same question. Why is investment leaving the country while it needs to stay in and be invested in Iran?

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Why is that?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

One of the most influential factors [affecting the society] is “asset drain.” Those who have accumulated money using illegal means are trying to hide it where it cannot be found easily. That is the most fundamental reason for this asset drain. For instance, Mr. Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, is making money everyday. He is investing his money back into the U.S. education system by doing things such as buying computers for kids. How come Mr. [Hashemi] Rafsanjani, who is said to have over billions of dollars, does not buy computers for kids in Tabriz, in Khoi, and in Sistan and Baluchestan? Why is that?

Why is it that the wealthy gentlemen in charge of the Revolutionary Guard Corps do not do anything like that? This is the question that the Iranian people have to ask these people.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

I see. Ms. Boghrat, as Mr. Sobhani implied in his comments, the bulk of this money seems to belong to officials in the Islamic Republic. There have also been reports confirming this subject. Does this movement of wealth mean that even the officials in Iranian government really do not place much hope in eventual survival of the regime? Otherwise, Mr. Rafsanjani would have invested in an Iranian toy factory and in Iranian children.

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

What needs to be understood is that investment overall necessitates a certain kind of infrastructure. The regime after the [Iranian] Revolution [of 1979] destroyed such infrastructure through mismanagement, corruption, and ignorance. The government took over certain things and they are now simply unable to do anything positive.

As you pointed out, when people realize their assets are not secure in Iran, they will move them elsewhere. It does not matter if it is Mr. Rafsanjani's money or someone else's. Capital would escape the country even if attempts were made to restrain it. The people you are talking about are not interested in investing their money in the country; they must have moved everything somewhere else by now, and put it to different uses for certain. After all of that, the amount of assets and capital remaining behind is used to move government assets around. It was only a couple of days ago when the regime announced its plans to "auction off" 20% of shares belonging to Iran National Copper Industries Company. "Auctioning off" means members of the private sector would make offers for those shares and whoever has the highest bid will take ownership of those shares.

The problem was that no foreign company was allowed to bid. Nor was there an Iranian private sector company present at the auction. The regime basically moved the shares to several shell companies owned by the government itself. According to reports, the whole auction took only seven minutes to complete. The auctioning off of 20% more of those shares is scheduled for next week and there is no hope in sight that any foreign company or Iranian private sector company will be allowed to participate in the auction.

All of this requires a proper set of conditions to exist. The regime is simply unable to provide these facilities. Those running the country do not listen to any economist or scholar about how to manage the economy. They are under the belief that they will be able to handle the affairs of a country of 70 million people. Mark my words: The collapse of the Islamic Republic will not be borne politically. It will come by way of the economic front. It will be exactly like the Soviet Union. The country that the USSR ruled over changed politically only on the surface. It was all the money that people had literally buried in the ground which buried the Soviet Union. The Islamic Republic will without a doubt implode economically the same way that the Soviet Union fell apart. International sanctions would only expedite that fate.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

You compared Mr. Rafsanjani with Bill Gates.

[Laughter]

Is Ms. Boghrat's comparison of the Iranian regime with the Soviet Union a logical one?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

First of all there cannot be a comparison between Bill Gates and Mr. Rafsanjani. I just wanted to make a point. However, Ms. Boghrat's view is correct. Even from a historical perspective, dictatorships have always been destroyed from within. Some have fallen due to political factors, but the majority of them fell as a result of economic failures.

When the Soviet Union reached a point of not being able to sustain itself economically, it fell apart. The Iranian regime will gradually weaken because of the failure of its economic policies. What remains to be seen is whether or not its principal rulers would hand over power to those who actually care about the welfare of that country.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Ms. Boghrat, very quickly please, would you attribute the failure of both the Soviet Union and the Islamic regime to their ideological approach to governance, or do you see other factors at work?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

A good portion of it is just what was discussed. Of course those two systems have fundamental differences in addition to their innate similarities. However, the dogmatic nature of both systems has played an important role in their destiny.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

In the few minutes left to midnight, Tehran time, we will be with you to review the news and continue analyzing the latest developments out of Iran.

Stay up with us as we stay with the Voice of America.

[VOA promo video clip]

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

We are having a discussion with our Thursday night guests Ms. Elahe Boghrat on the phone from Berlin and Dr. Sohrab Sobhani here in the studio. We are discussing the latest news out of Iran.

To Dr. Sobhani here: You just returned from a trip to Central Asia.

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

That is correct.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

You of course give me the good news that you have brought me bottles of mint syrup from that trip. [Laughter] Something that Hamideh should have done, but she did not. I thank you for that.

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

You are welcome.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

In Central Asia, what is the mood with regards to Iran's nuclear program? What are their fears and concerns of a possible attack against Iran? Of course, the U.S. and its allies have announced that they do not have such plans. Is the concern among the southern neighbors of Iran also shared by its neighbors to the north?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

What needs to be emphasized here is that the Iranian people and the Iranian government are the losers here. After the fall of the Soviet Union, political openness spread in Central Asia from Armenia all the way to Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan. A progressive Iran with its healthy economy could have taken advantage of this openness and benefited from the new conditions in Central Asia by implementing appropriate policies. I am afraid today we learned about a trip to Baku by Mr. Ahmadinejad. However, we can not repeat on television what was being said in Turkish about him in the market where he visited and delivered a speech. This is unfortunate. It is unfortunate because when we compare the two countries, we learn that the economic growth of a country which had no viable financial system up to 1994 is now 35% annually while Iran's is only 7% per year.

In Azerbaijan, in Baku, in Kazakhstan, and in Uzbekistan, we can see investment and goods from Turkey in all areas of the region. However, you cannot give away Iranian-made goods. People just do not like them. This is a huge loss for Iran, as it could have dominated that region's economy. But nothing like that has taken place.

There is another example that I would like to give very quickly: Through its wrong policies, the Iranian government lost the opportunity to create a pipeline that would have connected the Caspian Sea in the north with Persian Gulf in the south. Meanwhile, another pipeline has connected the Caspian Sea with the Mediterranean Sea. This is hurting the Iranian nation. Everyone from the late Ayatollah Khomeini and the former Iranian President Khatami to Mr. Ahmadinejad have to answer for this folly caused by their flawed policies. The people of Iran now have to carry the burden of this loss and suffer for it.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Ms. Boghrat, earlier in our discussion there was a mention of the RajaNews Web site [www.rajanews.com]. This site is said to be endorsed by the wife of Iran's Justice Minister and spokesman. The site has claimed that the display of wealth and comfort on television causes the poor to commit suicide. You expressed your views during our discussion earlier. However, we also see scenes of public execution on television and bodies hanging in public. In Mahan, for instance, seven people have been executed. In Khorasan province, fingers of four people who were accused

of robbery—they may have done it as the last resort and due to poverty—were cut off.

What is the meaning of this new wave of executions in Iran? How come we see a surge in number of executions in Iran?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

As I have said before, the goal of turning executions into public spectacles is nothing but putting fear in the public's heart. It is not going to affect the criminal element and it is not going to bring back the victim who is already dead anyway. So the government's logic of publicizing executions to make people fearful of committing crimes is nonsense. If that logic worked, with every execution we would witness fewer and fewer crimes every day. On the contrary, not only has the number of crimes risen each year, but the types of crimes being committed have also changed. This method of battling crime has spawned other types of crimes that did not previously exist, such as adultery and fornication with immediate relatives.

I therefore view this as another scare tactic by the government which is not focusing on preventing crime. Of course there is always going to be crime. But the government has been unable to lower the crime rate. By cutting someone's fingers or hand you would be adding to the number of disabled in society. It would not remove any crime. On the other hand, if the hands and feet of thieves were to be cut off, most of the Islamic Republic leaders would become incapacitated. The person who loses his hand or fingers, by the Iranian government's own admission, must have committed petty theft at most. On that scale, what should be the punishment for the leaders of the Islamic Republic who have robbed and pillaged the nation's wealth for years? What should their punishment be on scale with a small-time thief's losing his hand or fingers?

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Are you referring to the report of 40 billion dollars missing from Iranian treasury? Or did you have something else in mind?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

[Interposing] When someone can make 40 billion dollars disappear, I am not sure what to call him. Perhaps he should be given an award. This is one of the cases I had in mind, and there have been numerous other instances in previous years. The government itself has revealed those

cases, and they themselves know what is going on amongst them. By focusing on a few thieves and minor criminals and public executions, the government is actually letting the real thieves and robbers and criminals, who are higher-ups, get away with their crimes.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Dr. Sobhani, as you may have heard, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is going to visit the Middle East next week and meet with the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas too. Washington has repeatedly condemned Iran's position vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian problem, accusing it of causing turmoil and preventing peace in the region. Based on these circumstances, can Ms. Rice's trip bring about any positive results?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

It all depends on whether Saudi Arabia, which is a political heavyweight in the region, agrees to participate in the upcoming Middle East conference proposed by President Bush.

Saudi Arabia has drafted a peace plan in which it offers Israel full diplomatic recognition by Arab countries in return for that country's complete withdrawal from all Palestinian lands in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This plan is being reviewed by Israel. Moreover, if all Arab countries decide to help Mr. Abbas for real, there could be hope for finding a resolution to the Palestinian plight.

Both Israelis and Palestinians are capable and have the right to live together peacefully. But it will all eventually depend on these two points: What Saudi Arabia is going to do, and whether Arab countries actually invest money and provide real financial aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

You are an expert in the politics of the Persian Gulf's Arab countries and those of the U.S. That is why I am asking you this question, naturally: What is your analysis? Are Saudi Arabia, the six GCC countries, and the Gulf Cooperation Council supporting the Iranian position on the Palestinian problem, or are they more in line with the position taken up by the U.S.?

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

I do not think so. I think they follow their own position in the sense that they have developed an independent position. Although this independent position may be closer to the position the U.S. has adopted.

That position looks for a peaceful solution to the problem. It is not recommending violence and murder. It is not recommending support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and others to destabilize the region. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and others like them all believe in the Palestinians' right to have their own independent country. Based on a poll taken by Tel Aviv University, over 70% of people of Israel also agree with that statement. The same people also believe that if such a Palestinian country takes root, it will have to stay clear of the Islamic Republic influence. It should not be turned into a base for attacks against Israel.

This is one of the topics being discussed within the Israeli government.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

We now turn our attention to discussing Iran's internal developments with Ms. Boghrat.

Over 700 Iranian intellectuals and social activists have signed a letter demanding the release of Mr. Soheil Asefi, the jailed reporter who is on hunger strike. They have also asked for release of other such activists who are probably under torture and persecution in jail.

Why is the Islamic Republic judiciary resisting these requests despite the fact that many of these detainees, like Mr. Asefi, have not been charged with any crime?

[Ms. Elahe Boghrat]

The Islamic Republic is, in a way, an erratic regime. I would like to use the yo-yo metaphor to describe it. The Iranian government's goal of arresting activists, demonstrators, opposition figures, women's right advocates, and others is first and foremost to instill fear in society. They would intimidate both those who have been arrested and their families in the process. This is a benefit the government perceives in acting this way.

On the other hand, the government is aware that these folks cannot be held for a long time. After some torture and imprisonment, the government releases these people. But note what takes place during this process. Political analysts and social observers in Iran recognize it as a negative

development when they see these activists are arrested and jailed. When these activists are released from prison, the same analysts and observers declare that to be a positive step forward, instead of recognizing it as going back to the same repressive condition which existed prior to the arrests. This is like throwing sand in the eyes of those looking for the truth.

Western media used to make exactly the same assessment. Whatever illegal and unjust activities the government would commit was called repression. However, when the same government would revert its actions and, say, release a few prisoners, the Western media would consider that to be a step forward towards freedom and openness.

No one would stand up and say “You people had no right to arrest Mr. Asefi to begin with. You have no right to arrest students who are fighting for their rights, or workers who want to establish unions, or women who are defending their rights within their families.” Then, when these people are tortured, persecuted, and intimidated, the government would release them and take credit for their freedom.

This has been going on for a long time and has nothing to do with Mr. Ahmadinejad’s administration. It was going on during Khatami’s administration when there were serial political murders and such. After that, and little by little, it became the overruling policy of the Islamic Republic.

That is how they apply the yo-yo policy: by arresting, and then releasing, and then arresting again, and releasing yet again. Meanwhile a group of so-called analysts or observers have no clue what they are looking at or what is taking place right before their eyes, and nothing is really changing. The government had no right to arrest people to begin with and now they expect us to say hurrah because they have released the same people.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

Some say, Dr. Sobhani, that the U.S. policy towards Iran has been focused on its nuclear program and its alleged interference in Iraq. Due to these areas of focus, the U.S. has therefore neglected the human rights abuses going on inside Iran.

[Dr. Sohrab Sobhani]

There is no doubt, Mr. Chalangi, that Iran's nuclear program, along with its meddling in Iraqi affairs, has taken attention away from human rights in Iran. But I am certain that one of the main principles of the U.S. policy has been, and will be in the future, the topic of human rights around the world. Of course, when looking at the nation's overall interest, some areas can be considered more urgently. But in principle, human rights has always played a large role in the United States' policy framework.

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

With thanks to Dr. Sohrab Sobhani, and also to Ms. Elahe Boghrat in Berlin for sharing your independent views with us and with the viewers of "News Talk."

In a moment, we will go to your emails. Stay with the Voice of America.

[Video clip]

[Host Jamshid Chalangi]

We have to delay reading your emails again. We have given up apologizing for it and will just read them whenever we get a chance to do so. To our friend, Mr. Kourosh Hakhamaneshi, the points you have raised were many. We will do our best to address the important points you had brought up about our program. Mr. ABCD has sent us an email. In his email he writes:

This is Iran and its regime is the government of the Unseen Imam. Its ruling principles are rooted in the Koran; its leader is the ruler of the world's oppressed. People's main food is bread and bread costs as much as one's head. People's wealth now belongs to the Palestinians.

That was his email containing his views.

Aida has sent us an email saying "My name is Aida living in Tehran. This year I sat for the nationwide University Entrance Exam. However, the exam results for 800 of Iranian Bahá'ís was not released. We have received no response to our inquiries to officials. "

Nazanin has sent us an email from Tehran. She has shared her views about the Voice of America's broadcast times. Dear Nazanin, we have

noted your suggestions and they are being reviewed as we speak. The first such change will perhaps come by launching the “Zanan (Women)” program in late September. Other changes will be announced as they become available.

Ramin K. has sent us an email saying:

“Wish we had a bad affliction instead of having nothing at all. Wish we at least had bad laws instead of lawlessness. So many drugs enter Iran everyday either legally or illegally. So many wives and daughters escape their families and run away everyday. So many millions of dollars are paid to other countries but out of the pockets of Iranians. Today Iran is full of affliction; there is no such thing as safety. There is no emotional wellbeing. Pride, self-confidence, and patriotism have given their place to ...”

He has put dots after that last sentence and provided no more information. This seems to be the style of Ramin K.

We have received an email, a piece of news, from Ilya R. about the siege of Karaj Hosseinieh and the dervishes of the Nematollahi Gonabadi order, describing the siege and what had transpired there.

Sassan has sent an email. We would like to thank Sassan for the kind words he had for me and the program and my colleagues who are thankful too.

Siamak has sent us this poem:

“The clergy with his turban eats and drinks out of people’s pockets, as a lazy kid would drag himself to school.”

We have now reached the end of tonight’s program.

I wish you all the best of times and a better tomorrow, wherever you are around the world.

Good night.

TRANSLATION ENDS HERE