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Tumult after Bhutto death could delay vote



Islamabad (AFP)- Pakistan indicated it would delay January elections because of turmoil caused by the death of Benazir Bhutto, as a bitter dispute erupted over how the opposition leader was killed. Bhutto was killed at a campaign rally in the northern city of Rawalpindi last month. The United States and Western powers have urged Pakistan to commit to the democratic process in the aftermath of her death, but leading opposition figure Nawaz Sharif has said his party will boycott the polls. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, which has accused the government of trying to cover up the real circumstances of her death, has said it will decide whether to take part in the January parliamentary elections. Pakistan's interior ministry moved to quash the cover-up claims, saying its account of how Bhutto died was based on the facts and offering to exhume her body for inquiry. The crisis-hit country's election commission said it would hold an urgent meeting to decide the vote's fate but indicated a delay was possible. "All activities pertaining to pre-poll arrangements, including printing of ballot

papers and logistics as well as training of polling personnel, have been adversely affected," it said in a statement. In some places, the commission said, the security situation was "not conducive" to holding the elections which Bhutto had come home from exile in October of 2007 to contest. It cited the death of an election candidate in a bomb blast and said election commission offices in nine districts had been set ablaze and voter lists "reduced to ashes." The polls would lack credibility without the participation of Bhutto's PPP, which has been infuriated by the government's official account of their leader's death. Early reports said Bhutto had been shot before a bomb exploded nearby. However the government said she had no gunshot or shrapnel wounds. It said the opposition leader died after smashing her head on her car's sun-roof as she tried to duck. The ministry also blamed Al-Qaeda, saying intelligence services had intercepted a call from Baitullah Mehsud, considered the extremist group's top leader for Pakistan. Senior members of Bhutto's party dismissed the government's version of events, calling it lies. "There was a bullet wound I saw that went in from the back of her head and came out the other side," Bhutto's spokeswoman Sherry Rehman, who was involved in washing her body for burial, told AFP. "This is ridiculous, dangerous nonsense because it is a cover-up of what actually happened." Bhutto was an outspoken critic of Al-Qaeda-linked militants blamed for scores of bombings in Pakistan and she had received threats. But she had also accused elements from the intelligence services of involvement in a suicide attack on her rally in October 2007 that left 139 dead and which she only narrowly escaped. Maulana Omar, a spokesman for alleged Al-Qaeda kingpin Mehsud, denied involvement in the attack and expressed grief over Bhutto's death. "This is a conspiracy of the

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'Kite Runner' film released to critics' plaudits

Homayoun Ershadi, an Iranian architect turned actor, has been receiving rave reviews for his role in the highly acclaimed film, "The Kite Runner." Before getting involved in acting, Ershadi, 60, was an architect in Iran. He studied architecture at the University of Venice in Italy, and graduated in 1970. He has worked as an architect both in Iran and Canada. In "The Kite Runner," he plays the father of one of the two boys at the heart of the film. The National Post of Canada, applauded Ershadi's performance, saying, "Ershadi is the soul and conscience of the film; don't be surprised if he garners an Oscar nomination for supporting actor come January." While his career in architecture came after years of study, Ershadi's involvement in acting came rather suddenly. Driving around Tehran a decade ago, Ershadi says he pulled up to a red light and found someone tapping on his window. When he turned to see who it was, Ershadi saw one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers. Ershadi said he rolled down the window, and the director said, "I am Abbas Kiarostami. I want to do a film, and I want you to be in it." The next day, Kiarostami arrived at Ershadi's office. Ershadi and Kiarostami talked about acting and Kiarostami asked Ershadi to take a screen test. Three weeks later, he was chosen to star as the driver in the 1997 film, "A Taste of Cherry." Since then, Ershadi has acted in Iranian TV series, made-for television movies and films including: "The Pear Tree," "Love Lost" and "Portrait of a Lady Far Away." "The Kite Runner" is based on Khaled Hosseini's best-selling novel of the same name. The novel tells the story of two childhood friends who are torn apart in an unstable Afghanistan on the verge of war in 1975. To escape the war, the family of one of the boys—with the father played by Ershadi—moves to the United States. After living in

America for two decades, Amir returns to his homeland in hopes of finding the son of his childhood friend. What Amir finds is a fractured Afghanistan, and the harsh realities of Taliban rule. Ershadi says the book puts a human face on a country mainly in the headlines for the war. "We are misrepresented by the news about the Afghan people. And [the book] was talking about humans." The best-seller sold 8 million copies and garnered a loyal fan base that DreamWorks,



which produced the film, and Paramount Vantage, which released the film, are counting on to fuel the box office. The film was released December 14. Shaun Toub, an Iranian-American actor best known for his role as a convenience store owner in the Oscar winning film "Crash," plays Rahim Khan in "The Kite Runner." He says, "For years, the only roles out there [for Middle Eastern actors] were the vengeance

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Russia sends nuclear fuel to Busher

IranTimes: Russia delivered to Bushehr the first part of the fuel needed to power the nuclear plant there. The delivery suggested the power plant would begin to supply electricity next summer, nine years late. The plant contractor, Atomstroyeksport, said the fuel was flown from Siberia to Bushehr last month. It didn't say how much fuel was involved, but Iran said the full load of fuel would weigh 80 tons and be delivered over two months. Russian officials have long said the plant would start operating about six months after the full shipment of fuel had been delivered, which would signal a start-up next summer. Russia said the uranium fuel was enriched to 3.62 percent. Natural uranium ore is enriched to far less than 1 percent; power plant fuel is enriched to 3-to-5 percent; weapons grade uranium exceeds 90 percent. The shipment came 14 days after the U.S. intelligence community announced it had concluded that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2004. Some analysts said that was undoubtedly the reason for the decision to ship the fuel now, but, if so, Russia did not mention it.

Instead, Russian officials linked the shipment to successful negotiations last month that Russia said resolved all disputes over the plant between Russia and Iran. The alleged link between the shipment and the U.S. intelligence report appeared spurious. The Russians, some time ago, asked the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to measure and seal the fuel, the last step necessary before shipment. The IAEA inspectors sealed the fuel November 26, seven days before the U.S. intelligence report came out. Russia slowed worked on Bushehr a year ago, citing two reasons, First, it said the Islamic Republic had not been making promised payments on time. Iran said it had made all payments on time, but it did not complain loudly or frequently, suggesting

there was some merit to Russia's charges. Second, Russia said it was having trouble obtaining components for the plant from third parties in Europe. Apparently, those firms backed out of their contracts when the controversy over Iran's nuclear program intensified. The Russian Foreign Ministry announced the fuel shipment last month with a statement that emphasized the oversight of the IAEA and the fact that the spent fuel—which can be repro-

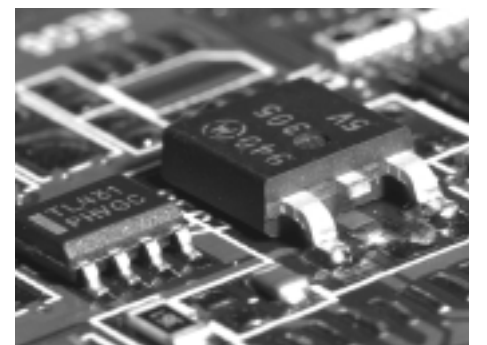


cessed into weapons-grade material—will be returned to Russia and not left in Iranian hands. The IAEA will periodically check the fuel to make sure none is diverted from Bushehr. That is standard IAEA practice around the world. The Russian Foreign Ministry statement went a step further, however, and urged Iran to halt its own uranium enrichment program. It said Monday's delivery made Iran's enrichment program redundant. Russia and China have both long agreed with the United States and Europe that Iran should cease enrichment.

Asked about the delivery at a public appearance in Virginia, President Bush echoed the Russian statement. He said he approved of the delivery and added, "If the Iranians accept that uranium for a civilian power plant, then there's no need for them to learn how to enrich."

Amir Kabir Univ. builds computer with U.S. chips

IranTimes: A research center at Amir Kabir University reports it has built Iran's fastest computer with American-made Opteron processors that cannot legally be sold to Iranian organizations. Opterons are made by Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) of Sunnyvale, California. The Iranian High Performance Computing Research Center (IHPCRC) at Amir Kabir in Tehran published an announcement on its website saying it has used 216 Opteron processing cores to build Iran's fastest computer to date to do weather forecasting and meteorological research. U.S. sanctions bar the sale to Iran of computers faster than 190 billion floating point operations per second. The research center website gave the speed of the Amir Kabir computer at 860 billion floating point operations per second, which the U.S.-based Computerworld magazine described as a "relatively small super-computer." It said the fastest computer now being marketed is about seven times the speed of the computer at Amir Kabir. A photo on the research center website shows a staffer working on a computer. Behind him is a stack of boxes labeled "Thacker UAE." Thacker has been a Dubai-based authorized



distributor of AMD products. But AMD said its distribution arrangement with Thacker was severed in July. Computerworld pointed out that Thacker's website still advertises AMD products. Contacted by Computerworld, Thacker said it was required to abide by the U.S. sanctions for the American products it markets. Anil Clifford, a company spokesman, said the firm has no customers in Iran. Clifford did say, however, that an Iranian could walk into Thacker in Dubai and buy any product he wanted. The Iran Daily said Amir Kabir's computer was entirely made domestically and thus "does not need the assistance of foreign companies."