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'Iran freer than U.S.'

IranTimes: President Ahmadi-nejad visited New York last month for the fourth year in a row and avoided saying Iran has no homosexuals, but he did claim the Islamic Republic has less poverty and "100 times more freedom" than the United States. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Ahmadinejad also claimed that 98 percent of Iranians support his government. As for poverty, Ahmadinejad said, "We do not have poor people or people who live below the poverty line to the extremes that you find in the United States." The poverty rate in the United States for 2007, just released by the U.S. Census Bureau, was 12.5 percent. Varying poverty figures have been released in Iran that are generally two to three times the U.S. rate. In an in-



terview with National Public Radio, the president said, "There's at least 100 times more freedom in Iran than there is in the United States." Ahmadinejad caused gales of laughter last year when he visited the United States and asserted that Iran has no homosexuals. That provided much fodder for American television comics, and is probably the comment by Ahmadinejad remembered by the largest number of Americans. One line Ahmadinejad did not repeat was that the United States was trying to kidnap or assassinate him. He made that charge about two previous foreign visits earlier this year. The Los Angeles Times said that when it interviewed him at his hotel in New York, the suite was "heavily guarded by agents of the Department of Homeland Security," which would suggest that Ahmadinejad did not really fear an American attack on his person. The president spoke to the UN General Assembly, met with Iranian expatriates, gave several interviews to American news outlets, and ate at iftar with a group of American religious leaders. In his UN speech, Ahmadinejad referred repeatedly to the United States as a "bullying power." He accused the United States and NATO of starting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan "in order to win votes in elections." But he also asserted that the United States was being manipulated by Zionists. He concluded that the "American empire is reaching the end of its road. Its next rulers must limit their interference to their own borders." His interview with National Public Radio was a bit testy at times as NPR's Steve Inskeep grew frus-

trated at Ahmadinejad's habit of asking questions rather than answering them. In the NPR interview, Ahmadinejad's theme was that the frictions between Iran and the United States were caused exclusively by the United States because it wished to have a confrontation. The president said, "We do not have confrontations with anyone. The U.S. Administration interferes, and we defend ourselves." Ahmadinejad used rhetoric that he frequently uses inside Iran, insisting, for example, that only "three or four countries" criticize Iran's nuclear program. He said, "First of all, the people of the world, the majority actually, support our stand—118 member states of the Non-Aligned Movement have declared their commitment to our program and supported it. And 57 member states of the Organizations of the Islamic Conference have also supported our position. Eight countries of the G-8 group actually supported us—as well as the 15 countries of the Group of 15." He did not mention that several of those states he claimed support Iran have voted against it, on the record, in the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council. He said the United States has opposed the Islamic Republic from the beginning. "When the Islamic Republic came into being, the U.S. government rose against it with all its might." However, Bruce Laingen, the senior U.S. diplomat in Tehran after the revolution, and one of those taken hostage in 1979, has said many times that his orders were to convey to Iranian officials that Washington accepted the Iranian revolution and was prepared to work with the new government. Ahmadinejad continued: "Several coup attempts occurred. The eight-year war between Saddam and our country was actually supported directly by the United States. From Day One, sanctions were imposed on our people. So who exactly is the provocateur? Who is the one who seeks war?" The first sanctions were imposed by President Carter in November 1979, only after the hostages were seized. NPR also posed questions about elections in Iran. "Elections in Iran are among the freest in the world," Ahmadinejad said. Then he attacked elections in the United States portraying them as a fraud. "Are 300 million people here in America members of either of the two parties? No, not necessarily. But people have no other choices here. You have only two choices. In Iran, at least, we have eight [candidates when Ahmadinejad ran in 2005]. Who is more free? Who has more confidence in its people." Ahmadinejad continued on the attack, as is his wont in interviews and news conferences. "There is a lot of freedom in Iran," he told NPR. "An example is our interview with you. Can you ask your own president these questions? Can you really meet with him so easily? Never! You cannot freely ask questions. But everybody asks questions of me freely." But, he insisted, "We're interested in having friendly relations" with the U.S.

Toman might soon replace rial

IranTimes: The Central Bank is toying with the idea of making the toman the national currency with 10 rials per toman. That plan would involve lopping both three and four zeros off the current currency. What is now 10,000 rials would lose four zeros and become one toman—but it would simultaneously lose three zeroes and become 10 rials. Such a change would have the advantage of accepting the reality of how Iranians work with their currency. The toman has not been an official currency under either the monarchy or the Islamic Republic. But for many decades, Iranians have tended to think in terms of tomans, so that 1,000 rials became 100 tomans in conversation. An unnamed official at the Central Bank told the Fars news agency that the shift to the toman as the real currency was under consideration. Central Bank Governor Tahmasb Mazaheri, however, was more circumspect. He told state radio three options were under review: lopping off three zeroes; lopping off four zeros; or adopting a gold standard and making each rial worth 1 percent of a gram of gold, which

would convert about 2,500 rials overnight to one rial. In other words, 10,000 rials would become 10 rials if three zeros were lopped off, 1 rial if four zeros were lopped off and about 4 rials if



the new gold standard were adopted. "We are studying all three options," Mazaheri said. He said the study would take "at least" a year and then would have to be sent to the Majlis for approval. He didn't explain why the study should take so long. Last month, the bank issued new bills with face values of 500,000 and 1,000,000 rials. The bills carried the numbers "50" and "100" in Western-style numerals, hinting at a shift of lopping off four zeros.

GOP oppose McCain on talks with Iran

IranTimes: Five former U.S. secretaries of state—including three Republicans advocated talks with Iran, coming much closer to the Barack Obama position than the John McCain stance on negotiating with Iran. One former Republican secretary added the note that he had proposed high-level talks, only to be rejected by Iran. Democrats Madeleine Albright and War-

said Powell, who served President George W. Bush in his first term. While serving under President George H.W. Bush from 1989 to 1992, Baker recalled that the elder Bush's administration offered to meet with Iran at the highest diplomatic level, but Iran refused for its own political reasons. Baker also said the United States might have to contain Iran just as it did with the



ren Christopher and Republicans Colin Powell, James Baker and Henry Kissinger gave the advice at a panel discussion at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. On Iran and Syria, both Republican and Democratic former secretaries backed engagement. McCain slammed Obama earlier in the campaign for taking a similar stand. "I believe we need to engage with Iran," said Albright who served under President Bill Clinton during his second term. Powell agreed with Albright. "Let's get together and talk about nuclear weapons. Start a dialogue at a low level and let it grow over time,"

Soviet Union for decades. The next American president, he said, should be prepared to warn Tehran that Washington will aim its "strategic deterrent" at Iran if it points a nuclear missile at Israeli or U.S. targets. Kissinger, who served under both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, said: "I'm in favor of negotiating with Iran." The U.S. aim would be to achieve a stable Middle East, he said. The panel included all the living former secretaries of state but three: Alexander Haig and George Shultz, who were President Reagan's secretaries, and Lawrence Eagleburger, who was briefly secretary under the first President Bush.

Islamic Rep. hangs two juveniles

IranTimes: Tehran hanged two juveniles, ignoring global calls for an end to such executions. Human Rights Watch promptly urged Iran's Judiciary to immediately commute the sentences of more than 130 others sentenced to capital punishment for crimes committed while minors. On August 26, Iran executed Behnam Zareh for a murder committed April 21, 2005, when he was 16. On August 19, Iran executed Seyyed Reza Hejazi for a murder committed November 14, 2005, when he was 15. Iran is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both of these bar executions of persons under 18 at the time of the crime. But Human Rights Watch said Iran has violated those agreements by executing six juvenile offenders since January. Since January 2005, Iran has executed at least 26 juvenile offenders, it said. During the same period, only four other countries—Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Pakistan—are known to have executed any juvenile offenders—a combined total of six. Iran thus accounts for 80 percent of all juveniles executed over the last 3 1/2 years. "Iran leads the world in executing juvenile offenders," said Clarisa Bencomo, a researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Everywhere else, countries are moving to end this abhorrent practice, but in Iran the numbers of death sentences seem to be increasing." In addition to violating its obligations as a party to two international conventions, Human Rights Watch said Iran violated Iranian law by failing to inform Zareh's lawyer of the pending execution. Zareh's family and his lawyer, Mohammad Mostafaei, only learned of Zareh's execution after the fact, although under Iranian law a convict's lawyer is required to be notified 48 hours before the execution. Zareh's family and lawyer had been trying to reach a settlement with



the victim's family at the time of the execution. Zareh's execution came one week after the execution of Hejazi at Esfahan Central Prison. The Esfahan General Court had convicted Hejazi of murder for his role in a 2003 fight involving several people. Hejazi was 15 at the time and repeatedly said he had not intended to kill the victim. As in the case of Zareh, the authorities did not notify Hejazi's lawyer, also Mostafaei, 48 hours prior to the execution. Mostafaei said he learned of the pending execution the night before. When Mostafaei tried to visit his client the morning of the execution, he said prison authorities sent him away, telling him the execution had been stayed. One hour later, Hejazi was hanged. "Killing people for crimes committed as children provides neither justice nor safety for Iranian society," Bencomo said. "The Iranian authorities' willingness to lie to lawyers and to deprive families of a last chance to see their loved ones only underscores the depravity of these executions."

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