

Pelosi power: Neocons face Judgement

by Ali Akbar Dareini via rialator - 570 News *Wednesday, Apr 4 2007, 12:21pm*

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U.K. sailors and marines arrive at airport after president announces release

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) - Fifteen British sailors and marines held captive for nearly two weeks in Iran arrived at the country's airport early Thursday after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced their surprise release the day before.



Pelosi in Damascus -- the art of communication!

The British crew, which entered the Mehrabad International Airport in a convoy of cars escorted by the elite Revolutionary Guards, was expected to board a British Airways flight scheduled to depart at 8 a.m. local time, according to an Associated Press reporter at the scene.

Wednesday's announcement defused a growing confrontation between the two countries. In London, British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed "profound relief" Wednesday over the peaceful end to the 13-day crisis, telling the Iranian people that "we bear you no ill will."

The crisis had raised oil prices and fears of military conflict in the volatile region. The move to release the sailors suggested that Iran's hardline leadership decided it had shown its strength but did not want to push the standoff too far.

Iran did not get the main thing it sought - a public apology for entering Iranian waters. Britain, which said its crew was in Iraqi waters when seized, insists it never offered a quid pro quo, either, instead relying on quiet diplomacy.

Syria, Iran's close ally, said it played a role in winning the release. "Syria exercised a sort of quiet diplomacy to solve this problem and encourage dialogue between the two parties," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said in Damascus.

The announcement of the release came hours after U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi met with President Bashar Assad in Damascus, trying to show that a U.S. dialogue with Syria - rejected by the Bush administration - could bring benefits for the Middle East. The British sailors were not part of their talks, and it was not clear if the release was timed to coincide with her visit.

Several British newspapers credited Blair's foreign policy adviser Nigel Sheinwald and Iranian chief negotiator, Ali Larijani, with laying the groundwork for an agreement during telephone contacts that began Tuesday night. Larijani had gone on British TV on Monday and signalled that Tehran was

looking for a diplomatic solution.

Ahmadinejad timed the announcement so as to make a dramatic splash, springing it halfway through a two-hour news conference Wednesday.

The president first gave a medal of honour to the commander of the Iranian coast guards who captured the Britons, and admonished London for sending a mother, Leading Seaman Faye Turney, on such a dangerous mission in the Persian Gulf.

He said the British government was "not brave enough" to admit the crew had been in Iranian waters when it was captured.

Ahmadinejad then declared that even though Iran had the right to put the Britons on trial, he had "pardoned" them to mark the March 30 birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and the coming Easter holiday.

"This pardon is a gift to the British people," he said.

After the news conference, Iranian television showed a beaming Ahmadinejad on the steps of the presidential palace shaking hands with the Britons - some towering over him. The men were decked out in business suits and Turney wore an Islamic head scarf.

"Your people have been really kind to us, and we appreciate it very much," one of the British men told Ahmadinejad in English. Another male service member said: "We are grateful for your forgiveness."

Ahmadinejad responded in Farsi, "You are welcome."

Three members of the crew were later interviewed on Iranian state-run television, apologizing for the alleged incursion into Iran's waters and again thanking Ahmadinejad for their release.

"I can understand why you're insulted by the intrusion into the waters," said Lt. Felix Carman, shown seated on a couch.

"Thank you for letting us go and we apologize for our actions, but many thanks for having it in your hearts to let us go free," Turney said.

The breakthrough caught the British government by surprise. On Tuesday, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett cautioned reporters not to expect a quick end to the standoff.

The U.S. cautiously welcomed Iran's announcement, though Vice President Dick Cheney said "it was unfortunate that they were ever taken in the first place."

With the timing unclear for release of the captives - President George W. Bush and others have called them "hostages" - administration officials reacted positively but allowed Blair to do the lion's share of the public talking.

The British crew was seized March 23 as it searched for smugglers. Iran broadcast footage of Turney and some other crew members "confessing" they had entered Iranian waters. An infuriated Britain froze most bilateral contacts, prompting Tehran to roll back on a pledge to free Turney.

Wednesday's announcement led some analysts to conclude that Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, decided the crisis had gone on long enough at a time when Tehran faces mounting pressure over its nuclear program. A day after the British were seized, the UN Security Council imposed new sanctions on Iran for refusing to halt uranium enrichment.

During Ahmadinejad's news conference, the hardline president said Britain had sent a letter to the Iranian Foreign Ministry pledging that entering Iranian waters "will not happen again." Britain's Foreign Office would not give details about the letter but said its position was clear that the detained crew had been in Iraqi waters.

Regardless of the territorial issue, the standoff showed that Tehran has ways to push back after the United States and Britain beefed up their military presence in the Persian Gulf this year.

The U.S. has accused Iran of sending weapons to Shiite militias in Iraq. That led to speculation that the Iranians seized the Britons in retaliation for the detention of five Iranians by U.S. forces in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil in January. Iran denied any connection.

Shortly before the announcement, Iranian state media reported that an Iranian envoy would be allowed to meet the five Iranians. A U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad said American authorities were considering the request, although an international Red Cross team, including one Iranian, had visited the prisoners.

Another Iranian diplomat, separately seized two months ago by uniformed gunmen in Iraq, was released and returned Tuesday to Tehran. Iran accused the Americans of abducting him, a charge the United States denied.

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