

WORLD

Anniversary of early Iran dispute

Can it really be 25 years since the US hostage crisis in Tehran?

JOSIE MULBERRY

One of the events that still springs vividly to mind for those who lived through it is remembered on Friday: the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979. January 20 marks the 25th anniversary of the release of 52 Americans held captive for more than a year in the Iranian capital, Tehran.

The hostages were seized at the American embassy on November 4 by a group comprising hundreds of students, angry over the entrance of Iran's ousted Shah into the United States. The Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, had reigned over a constitutional monarchy with the support of the West, his overthrow in January 1979. Shiite cleric Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini then returned from exile in Paris and converted the country into the Islamic Republic it remains today.

The dethroned Shah had taken refuge in Egypt for months, but when he was diagnosed with cancer, US president Jimmy Carter permitted him to enter the United States to undergo surgery. This greatly angered supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini, who wanted the former ruler to stand trial in Iran.

In response to the Iran hostage crisis, Carter imposed economic sanctions, but this did not daunt the Ayatollah loyalists. Not even the death of the Shah in July 1980 made a difference. The Americans remained captive for a total of 444 days. Conditions for the hostages, who suffered from psychological abuse, were never good, but the students provided them with basic care such as food, sanitation and exercise.



Hostages were kept blindfolded during most of their time in captivity

Iran questions Holocaust on eve of Genocide Day

N.S.

As World War II Genocide Memorial Day approaches, the Iranian government this week announced a conference to question the authenticity of the Holocaust. January 27 is the day designated by the United Nations as the annual remembrance day for the mass murder of 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany as well as other victims of genocide. Yet, an Iranian foreign ministry spokesman told the press this week that "scientific evidence" supporting the Holocaust would be examined, although he would not say when or where the conference would be held, nor who would attend.

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has recently criticised the state of Israel, publicly calling for it to be "wiped off the map" and referring to the Holocaust as a "myth". Though Ahmadinejad has since been rebuked by the UN Security Council, his inflammatory words have found a sympathetic ear in some parts of the Muslim press.

Sections of the Muslim world have also had difficulty accepting the UN designation of January 27 as a day to remember the Jewish victims of genocide. The boycott of the day that some representative Muslim organisations held last year is likely to be repeated at the end of the month.

New Orleans mayor apologises for God remarks

New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin has apologised for comments suggesting that the savage hurricanes of 2005 were divine retribution for the war in Iraq. On Monday, Nagin had said God must be "mad at America... for being in Iraq under false pretences". However, outrage forced a retraction, and he described some of his remarks as "totally inappropriate". He also said he had not meant to offend anyone with his call for New Orleans to be a "chocolate—or black—city. Nagin, who is black, said he had merely meant to convey that blacks were a key part of New Orleans' history and culture, and should be encouraged to return. On Monday, Nagin told an audience on Martin Luther King Day that God was angry at the US for the Iraq war. "Surely God is mad at America. He sent us hurricane after hurricane after hurricane, and it's destroyed and put stress on this country," Nagin said. "Surely he doesn't approve of us being in Iraq under false pretences. "But surely he is upset at black America also. We're not taking care of ourselves," he said./C.T.

Hundreds of pilgrims killed and injured in Hajj stampede

Hundreds of people were killed as up to two million pilgrims made their way to the 15 metre Jamarat Bridge, which spans a small valley at Mina, near Mecca. The pilgrims were on their way to carry out one of the sacred traditions of hurling stones at pillars that represent the Devil, when the stampede occurred. An unnamed Saudi security official said "there were more than 400 metres of people pushing in the same direction which resulted in the collapse of those next to the stoning area...and those behind. That led to panic." In an effort to control the numbers at the Hajj, Saudi Arabia sets quotas for pilgrims from each country and requires its citizens to register. The Hajj minister, Iyad Madani, said most of the victims were from outside Saudi Arabia and were not authorised to participate. Arab press, deeply horrified by the tragedy, have given a series of suggestions, including that of fatwas being issued to allow the stoning to take place at any time of the day, instead of restricting the ritual to noon time, a situation which leads to crowding and shoving./S.S.

Countries united in mistrust over Iran

STACEE SMITH

World powers, including Russian, Chinese and US officials, failed to reach a full agreement on how to proceed at a meeting in London this week. However, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has offered a compromise, suggesting that Iran sends uranium to Russia for enrichment—which would make it more difficult for Iran to develop nuclear weapons of its own. Iran broke seals on three nuclear facilities last week and says it is to resume research for civilian nuclear power purposes. Though the Iranian government denies aiming to use its nuclear technology to build weapons, international leaders fear the opposite is true.



Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad caused much international outrage when he called for Israel to be "wiped off the map" in October of last year. Acting Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert said that under no circumstances can the Jewish state allow "anyone with these kinds of malicious designs against us to have control of weapons of destruction that can threaten our existence."

Britain, France and Germany have been prompted to call for an emergency meeting next month (February 2 and 3) of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency. The IAEA could refer the issue to the UN Security Council, which in turn could decide to impose sanctions, but Russia and China appear wary of imposing an embargo.

Quotes of the Week

► "She is proving the adage that where you stand depends on where you sit"

IVO DALDER, a Bill Clinton official, on US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice

► "My eye was caught by an article for a new hearing aid that lets you hear only what you want. Nothing revolutionary there. Politicians have been wearing them for years"

Thriller writer FREDERICK FORSYTH

► "The fans who want to see Messi, Tevez, Saviola and Agüero all together should go out and rent Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"

Argentina Football Association president JULIO GRONDONA insists the national team cannot afford a team of pint-sized playmakers at the World Cup