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Iran ...

"Another serious effort that we have on the foreign policy agenda is making the economic diplomacy more active in the next four years. That is utilizing the capacity of diplomacy to expand economic relations," he explained.

Mottaki has appointed Mansour Borqei, the former presidential aide responsible for drawing up annual budgets, as his advisor that shows he is serious in activating economic diplomacy.

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Armed ...

The truck-mounted S-300PMU1, known in the West as the SA-20, can shoot down cruise missiles and aircraft. It can fire at targets up to 150 km (90 miles) away and travel at more than two km per second.

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The Bolivarian ...

an forces or the accusation that the paramilitary plan to conduct actions within Venezuelan territory could be the pretext required by Chavez's regime to suspend constitutional rights."

Such words can only serve to justify the United States' aggressive plans and the blatant treachery of the Venezuelan oligarchy and counter-revolution to their Homeland.

Coinciding with the release of that editorial, the Bolivarian leader had published his weekly column known as "Chavez's lines," where he analyzed the shameful concession of seven U.S. military bases in Colombia, a country that shares about 1,281 miles of border with Venezuela.

In his article, the President of the Bolivarian Republic was very clear and brave in explaining his position.

"...I said it this Friday at the rally for peace and against the U.S. military bases in Colombian territory: It is my duty to appeal to all of you, men and women, to defend Bolivar's Homeland, our children's Homeland... Our Homeland is free today and we shall defend it with our lives. Never again will Venezuela be anybody's colony; never again will it kneel down before any invader or empire...the extremely serious and transcendental problem in Colombia cannot be overlooked by the Latin American governments..."

Later on, he added some important concepts: "...the entire 'gringo' war arsenal included in the agreement responds to the concept of extraterritorial operations...it turns the Colombian territory into an enormous Yankee military enclave...the greatest threat to peace and security in the South American region and in Our America."

"The agreement...prevents Colombia from offering anyone security and respect; not even Colombian men and women. A country that has lost its sovereignty and become an instrument of the 'new colonial power' envisioned by our Liberator cannot offer such guarantees."

Chavez is a true revolutionary, a profound and sincere thinker, a courageous and restless worker. He did not win power through a coup d'état. He rebelled against the repression and genocide unleashed by the neoliberal governments that surrendered the country's huge natural resources to the United States. He endured incarceration; he matured and developed his ideas. He did not win power with weapons despite his military background.

It is his merit to have taken the difficult path of a profound social Revolution starting out from the so-called representative democracy and an absolute freedom of expression, at a time when the most powerful media resources of the country were -- they still are -- in the hands of the oligarchy and at the service of the empire's interests.

In just 11 years, Venezuela has

achieved the greatest educational and social progress attained by any country in the world, despite the coup d'état and the destabilization plans and smearing campaigns implemented by the United States.

The empire did not decree an economic blockade on Venezuela, -- as it did in the case of Cuba -- after the failure of its sophisticated actions against the Venezuelan people because it would have meant blockading itself given its foreign energy dependence. But it has not abandoned its purpose to do away with the Bolivarian process and the generous support this gives the Caribbean and Central American peoples in terms of oil resources, and its extensive trade relations with South America, China, Russia and numerous countries of Asia, Africa and Europe. Large segments of the population in every continent sympathize with the Bolivarian Revolution whose relations with Cuba are especially upsetting for the empire which for half a century has sustained a criminal blockade against our country. Through the ALBA, Bolivar's Venezuela and Marti's Cuba are promoting a new type of relationship and exchange on rational and fair basis.

The Bolivarian Revolution has been particularly generous with the Caribbean countries in times of an exceptionally grave energy crisis.

In the current new stage, the Venezuelan Revolution is facing entirely new problems which did not exist almost exactly 50 years ago, when our Revolution triumphed in Cuba.

At that time, drug-trafficking, organized crime, social violence and the paramilitaries were barely known. The United States had yet to become the huge drug market that capitalism and the consumer society have turned it into. It was not so difficult for the Revolution to fight drug-trafficking in Cuba and to prevent the country from being drawn to its production and consumption.

Today, such scourges have brought to Mexico, Central America and South America a growing tragedy which is far from beaten. The unequal terms of trade, protectionism and the plundering of their natural resources has been compounded by drug-trafficking and the violence of organized crime that underdevelopment, poverty, unemployment and the huge U.S. drug market have created in the Latin American societies. The incompetence of that imperial and wealthy nation to prevent drug-trafficking and abuse has paved the way for the cultivation in many places of Latin America of plants whose value as raw material for drug production often exceeds that of the rest of the farm products, thus creating a very serious social and political quagmire.

In Colombia, the paramilitary is today the imperialism's frontline force to combat the Bolivarian Revolution.

It is precisely thanks to his military background that Chavez knows that the struggle against drug-trafficking is a vulgar pretext used by the United States to justify a military agreement that fully responds to the U.S. post-cold war strategic concept of extending its world domination.

The air bases, the means, the operational rights and total impunity granted to the Yankee military and civilian personnel by Colombia in its own territory have nothing to do with fighting drug cultivation, production and trafficking. This is currently a world problem spreading not only to South American countries, but also to Africa and other regions. It already prevails in Afghanistan despite the massive presence of the Yankee troops.

Drugs should not be used as a pretext to set up bases, invade countries and bring violence, war and plundering to Third World nations. This is the worst environment to sow good qualities among the people and to bring education, healthcare and development to other nations.

Those who think that division between Venezuelans and Colom-

bians can lead to the success of their counterrevolutionary plans are deceiving themselves. Many of the best and most humble workers in Venezuela are Colombians; the Revolution has given them and their immediate family education, healthcare, employment, the right to citizenship and other benefits. Together, Venezuelans and Colombians shall defend the great Homeland of the Liberator of the Americas; together, they shall fight for peace and freedom.

The thousands of Cuban doctors, educators and other collaborators carrying out their internationalist duty in Venezuela shall be with them!

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Iraqi ...

The U.S. military wants to retain a robust presence in Iraq until a new government is seated and the security situation is clear.

"Until now there are no signs that any agreement is reachable," said Abbas Bayati, a lawmaker of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's ruling Shi'ite alliance.

"We are afraid that if we accept the veto of the vice president, the door will be open to more objections from other parties and this door will never be shut," he said.

Topping the list of other parties with concerns are Kurdish lawmakers, who have indicated they will want more seats for the three provinces in their semi-autonomous northern enclave if Hashemi gets his way on greater representation for exiles.

"It's not right to solve one problem and leave other problems unsolved," said Fouad Masoum, head of the Kurdish parliamentary bloc.

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Turkey ...

The auction was held in September 2008, amid global financial turbulence, with Ankara rejecting requests by interested companies for a postponement.

Turkey plans to build three nuclear power plants in hopes of preventing a possible energy shortage and reducing dependence on foreign supplies but the project is fiercely opposed by environmentalists.

Ankara abandoned an earlier plan to build a nuclear plant at Akkuyu in 2000 amid a severe financial crisis and protests from environmentalists in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus.

Critics say Akkuyu is close to a seismic fault line, pointing at a powerful earthquake that killed more than 140 people in the neighboring province of Adana in 1998.

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Obama ...

"I spoke with leaders in every nation I visited about what we can do to sustain this economic recovery and bring back jobs and prosperity for our people -- a task I will continue to focus on relentlessly in the weeks and months ahead," Obama said in his weekly radio and Internet address taped while he was in Seoul, the South Korean capital, and released Saturday.

The president pitched his trip as a way to reintroduce the U.S. to those trading partners, including China.

The Chinese government is the United States' biggest foreign creditor with \$800 billion of federal U.S. debt, which gives it extraordinary power in the relationship. And Beijing feels the global recession, sparked by U.S. financial industry excesses, vindicates its authoritarian leadership.

Obama told Americans that there can be no solutions to climate change or energy without the cooperation of Asian and Pacific nations. Repeating a theme he used abroad, Obama told the U.S. audience that the discussions directly affect U.S. national security.

"We made progress with China and Russia in sending a unified message to Iran and North Korea that they must live up to their international obligations and either forsake nuclear weapons or face the consequences," he said.

Obama's trip included a town hall-style event with students in Shanghai and discussion about a coming climate summit in Copenhagen. He also prodded China to loosen restrictions on Internet access and increase freedoms of speech and religion.

Obama repeatedly has said the United States does not wish to contain China's rise. Instead, on Saturday, he said that if the United States can increase exports to the Asia-Pacific region by 5 percent, then the markets would create "hundreds of thousands" of jobs as a trading partner.

"Even though it will take time, I can promise you this," Obama said. "We are moving in the right direction ... the steps we are taking are helping and I will not let up until businesses start hiring again, unemployed Americans start working again, and we rebuild this economy stronger and more prosperous than it was before."

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Rwanda ...

"Personally I feel very very sad because of the results. We don't accept the decisions. We feel very sad that they let those people free," Kayinamura told Reuters.

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Violence ...

The pictures Kabwela sent out were not pornographic. Rather, they were horrific: images of a woman in the midst of a breech birth, the baby's legs dangling out between her own while its head was still inside her. It all happened in a hospital parking lot (she had already been turned away from two clinics), but nobody would help her because of the strike, and the baby suffocated.

Her appalled and furious relatives brought pictures of the scene to the Post. Kabwela did not publish them because they were so upsetting, but she sent copies to senior officials together with a letter urging them to intervene and settle the strike. That's when Banda declared the images pornographic and had her arrested.

The courts are still independent in Zambia, and in the end Kabwela was found not guilty -- but many of the witnesses were genuinely more shocked by photographs of a woman naked from the waist down than by the horror of what was actually happening. As one witness said: "We are all Zambians here. We all know this is not allowed in our culture."

The word you're looking for is "prudish," and it applies to a lot of African popular culture. Never mind what's actually happening. We don't want to hear about it, and we certainly don't want to see it. The Zambian elite has been devastated by HIV/AIDS -- the higher the social class, the worse the death rate -- and yet nobody wants to talk about sex, let alone about the links between sex, power and violence.

Go a thousand kilometers south to South Africa, and the gulf between appearances and reality is even wider. Last June the country's Medical Research Council published a study about rape and HIV which reported that 28 percent of South African men admitted to having raped a woman or a girl. (A further 3 percent said that they had raped a man or boy.)

Almost half the rapists said they had raped more than one person, and three-quarters of them said they had carried out their first assault before the age of 20. They didn't use condoms, and they were twice as likely to be HIV-positive than non-rapists. This is a national calamity that is killing more people than

a middle-sized war, and causing a huge amount of pain and grief. Yet few South Africans are even willing to talk about it.

Many Africans will be feeling very defensive at this point, but a lot of this reminds me of where I grew up. There was an amazing amount of low-level violence around -- you saw it literally every day -- and there was also a huge amount of sexual predation. In the boys' school I went to, the male teachers molested the boarders on an industrial scale, although day-boys like me were fairly safe. And none of it was ever admitted or discussed in public.

Now I live in a culture where we are no longer prudish. Everything is out in the open, including trivialized, commercialized sex on a hundred channels. Around half of all marriages end in divorce, but gays, once persecuted and forced to hide, can also get married if they want to. You can still be mugged in the street, but the level of casual violence -- usually men beating up on women or kids -- is sharply down. I bet that the real figures for rape are down a lot too.

I like the transformed culture I live in now a lot better -- and it occurs to me that what we are seeing in Africa now may be as transitional as what I grew up with in Newfoundland. In which case the moral and cultural changes that socially conservative Africans see as a descent into darkness may actually be a move towards the light.

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Political ...

In his televised debate with Mousavi a few days before the elections, Ahmadinejad questioned the source of income of Rafsanjani's children and implied that they had used their father's influence to accumulate wealth.

Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, a conservative who ran against Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani in the 2005 elections, also supported Mousavi against the president. Qalibaf's supporters say he is now being made to pay the price.

Qalibaf and Hashemi have on many occasions accused the government of withholding the budget allocated to the development of the metro as well as the budget for paying ticket subsidies. They say a lack of funding hinders the day-to-day operation of the subway.

Metro tickets in Tehran are heavily subsidized jointly by the government and the municipality, leaving passengers to pay only one quarter of the ticket's actual value.

In other large Iranian cities such as Mashad, Isfahan and Shiraz, the construction of subway systems is under central government's control. Ahmadinejad's critics say in these cases the running of the projects has been very poor.

The Mashad system, which has been overseen by a government-appointed provincial governor, is the only network that has been completed but it is still not operational because of a four-year delay in acquiring the rolling stock, according to the Ayandeh News web portal affiliated to Tehran mayor.

Coal mine blast kills 42 in China, 66 trapped

HARBIN, China (AP) — Rescuers working in frigid cold and darkness tried to reach 66 people believed trapped a third of a mile (half a kilometer) underground after a huge gas explosion Saturday ripped through a coal mine in northern China, killing at least 42 people.

The pre-dawn blast at the state-run Xinxing mine in Heilongjiang province near the border with Russia is latest to hit China's deadly mining industry. Authorities say parlous safety is improving, but hundreds still die in major accidents each year.

Television footage showed smoke billowing out of the mine after the explosion went off, caused by a gas build-up. It caused a building to collapse nearby.

Brazil: U.S. responsible for the crisis in the Middle East

SALVADOR, Brazil (Agencies) —The U.S. is responsible for the crisis in the Middle East and shouldn't be coordinating peace talks for the region, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said, Bloomberg reported.

Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians ought to be managed by the United Nations, Lula said in an interview with two local radio stations in Salvador, Bahia state, where he met Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. An audio file of his remarks appeared on the presidency's Web site.

"As long as the United States is trying to negotiate peace there won't be peace," Lula said. "The one who should oversee the negotiations is the United Nations, and that's why Brazil wants to reform the UN system."

Israeli settlement expansion on Palestinian territory must stop immediately, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Friday as he seeks to position Brazil as a player in the Middle East.

"The expansion of West Bank settlements must be frozen," Lula said after meeting for two hours with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas.

"The borders of the future Palestinian state should be preserved, and freedom of movement needs to be guaranteed in the occupied territories."

For his part, Abbas blasted Israel's decision to pursue settlement activity as an "obstacle on the road to peace" in the Middle East.

He noted that under the U.S.-backed 2003 roadmap, a peace plan that calls for a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel, the Tel Aviv regime is required to freeze all settlement construction, AFP reported.

The roadmap also demands that Israel dismantle all settlement outposts, or dwellings the state itself considers illegal.

"Therefore if the Israeli government continues to build, notably in occupied east Beit-ul-Moqaddas, that will mean it is erecting obstacles along the road to peace," Abbas said.

The Palestinian leader called on Lula, who met last week with visiting Israeli President Shimon Peres, to play a greater role in international efforts to reach an agreement on Middle East peace.

"We appreciate the efforts of Brazil," Abbas told reporters in the northeastern city of Salvador.

"With respect to you, President Lula, we would like you to have a role, and you're ready for it," he said, adding that "the world can benefit from" Brazil's influence in the region.

The two leaders discussed the long-stalled Middle East peace process and a way forward for the Palestinian territories.

"The peace process will benefit from the contribution of other countries other than those traditionally involved" in negotiation efforts, Lula said.

In recent weeks, Brazil has hinted at ambitions to play a role in Middle East affairs as the country seeks to boost its international profile to match its growing economic heft.

After Peres and Abbas, Lula is expected to meet Monday with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as part of a flurry of talks with Middle East leaders.

Abbas is to head to Argentina today to meet with President Cristina Kirchner.