

Iran objects to spy satellite launch

By Seema Mustafa

New Delhi, Feb. 5: Iran-India relations have come under fresh strain following the government's decision to launch an Israeli spy satellite to monitor military and other activities in Iran. Iranian ambassador Seyed Mahdi Nabizadeh confirmed this in response to a question at a press interaction on Tuesday, pointing out that his government had informally raised the issue with the UPA government, which had justified the launch on technical and commercial grounds.

"We hope the issue could be considered from the political point of view also," the ambassador said, maintaining that there were some countries that were trying to destroy "very strong and deep-rooted" relations between Iran and India. Mr Nabizadeh said Iran was optimistic that "wise and independent countries such as India would not give their space and technology to other countries to launch instruments for spying on friendly countries like Iran".

India hired out its launching pad to Israel for an as yet undisclosed sum of money to launch its satellite, which Israeli newspapers, quoting senior government officials, said was intended to spy on Iran and Syria. The Iranian ambassador replied with a short "No" when asked if the government here had informed Tehran of the decision before the satellite was launched. It was clear that Tehran had taken up the issue at a government-to-government level only to be given the official information that it was a commercial enterprise that would also help India test its technical prowess in this field. The Left has taken the lead in condemning the "strategic decision" with leaders pointing out that governments do not usually allow their territory to be used to spy on friendly nations.

The India-Iran-Pakistan pipeline is also stuck because of New Delhi's refusal to attend the discussions and find a way out of the problems it claims has stalled negotiations. One of the sticking points is the transit fee being charged by Pakistan, which has now offered to renegotiate this. Mr Nabizadeh said the Iranian oil minister had approached his counterparts in India and Pakistan for a trilateral meeting. "We expect a response from the Indian government tomorrow, and if it is positive, we hope to have this meeting on February 12 or 13," he said. India has been steadfast in refusing to attend any of the meetings convened by Iran or Pakistan on the gas pipeline in recent months with petroleum and natural gas minister Murli Deora keeping a visible distance from "pipeline diplomacy" since July last year.

Mr Deora will not be attending the proposed trilateral meeting although agencies have quoted "sources" as saying that he is not averse to visiting Pakistan after the elections there. He has not visited Pakistan till date on this issue with the transit fee being cited as the excuse for the delay. The other issue that the UPA government has raised is Iran's demand for a price revision every five years, although both Tehran and Islamabad have pointed out that these were "easily settled" issues but could be done only through direct talks that Mr Deora has been avoiding till date.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has also received an invitation from the Iranian government for a visit to India. Mr Nabizadeh said a meeting of the India-Iran joint commission was expected to be held in June after which his government was optimistic that the prime ministerial visit would materialise. Iran and India have been cooperating in the construction of roads in Afghanistan. When asked about this, the ambassador said that Iran, Pakistan and India had all been working together with Afghanistan for peace and stability in the region.