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Hardline Iran cleric urges tough stance on detainees

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TEHRAN (Reuters) - A hardline cleric on Friday said Iran's judiciary should resist attempts by European powers to bully them into releasing Western-linked detainees, held over the unrest that followed a disputed presidential election.

In a speech broadcast live on state radio, senior cleric Ahmad Khatami told worshippers at Tehran University that Britain and other states had used their embassies in Tehran to plot against Iran's clerical leadership.

Iran has staged mass trials of those arrested after the June 12 vote, including a Frenchwoman and Iranian employees of the British and French embassies, a process aimed at uprooting the opposition and putting an end to protests.

"It became clear that some embassies in Iran, particularly the British embassy, were involved in some plots and some of their employees took part in post-election protests," Khatami said.

"The Iranian nation expects the judiciary to ... resist the bullying of the European countries," he said.

Khatami is a member of the Assembly of Experts, a powerful, conservative-dominated panel of 86 clerics that has the right to elect and dismiss Iran's Supreme Leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The opposition says the June poll was rigged to secure the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was sworn in last week. The authorities say Ahmadinejad's landslide win was an accurate reflection of the voters' wishes.

Mass street protests over the vote triggered the worst unrest in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution, and the authorities' failure to end weeks of criticism by opposition figures have highlighted deep divisions in the establishment.

The fallout from the post-election unrest has further clouded the prospect of Iran accepting U.S. President Barack Obama's offer of direct talks on Iran's nuclear program.

Tehran denies it has nuclear arms ambitions and its ambassador to the UN nuclear watchdog, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, said Iran would propose banning military attacks on nuclear facilities at a meeting next month.

Israel, believed to be the Middle East's only nuclear power, sees Iran's nuclear program as a threat to its existence and has not ruled out military action to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Iran refuses to recognize Israel.

"SHEER LIES"

Khamenei has accused Western powers of fomenting the post-vote unrest. Losing candidates say 69 people were killed, more than double the official death toll of 26.

Mehdi Karoubi, the most liberal of the candidates that lost to Ahmadinejad, has angered hardliners by alleging that some of those arrested after the election were tortured to death.

He has also alleged on his Internet website that male and female prisoners

in Tehran's Kahrizak prison were raped, a charge the authorities have rejected as "baseless."

Khatami, in forthright criticism of Karoubi, said the allegations of the former parliament speaker had "made America, Israel and other enemies happy."

"This letter harmed the system's prestige. We expect the Islamic system to confront him properly ... for issuing such a letter that was baseless and full of sheer lies, according to the judiciary and parliament."

The stream of criticism by Karoubi, another defeated candidate Mirhossein Mousavi, as well as moderate former President Mohammad Khatami, have angered hardliners.

The Revolutionary Guard's political chief Yadollah Javani has called for all three to be put on trial for inciting unrest.

Reports of detainee abuse have caused widespread anger which official denials have failed to quell. Many protesters were held in Kahrizak prison in south Tehran, where at least three people died in custody.

The abuse allegations have created a rift even among hardline politicians, many of whom backed Ahmadinejad's re-election. Khamenei ordered Kahrizak closed last month.

The uproar over alleged detainee abuse from moderates and conservatives could yet complicate Ahmadinejad's attempts to name a cabinet. He must win parliament's approval in what may prove to be a stormy process.

(Additional reporting by Boris Groendahl in Vienna; Editing by Jon Boyle)

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