

Thousands march in Iran anti-government protests

By Barbara Slavin

A group of regime supporters pushed through the crowds at one point and attacked former president Mohammad Khatami, according to a reformist Web site. It said opposition activists rescued Mr. Khatami and that he was unharmed.

Associated Press reported that other hardliners went after Mir Hossein Mousavi, a former prime minister who many Iranians believe actually won the June elections. Supporters pushed Mr. Mousavi into his car and he escaped, a witness said.

Mehdi Karroubi, a presidential candidate and cleric who has taken up the cause of Iranians abused in prison since the vote, also participated in the demonstrations.

The protests came only days before Mr. Ahmadinejad is due to arrive in New York for the annual meeting of the U.N. General Assembly. While he has faced protests in the past from Israel supporters, groups that oppose Iran's nuclear program and some Iranian exile organizations, this year the demonstrations are expected to be much larger.

Normally not press-shy, the Iranian leader is limiting his appearances to his speech at the U.N., private dinners with Iranian-Americans and think tankers and a press conference with U.N. correspondents.

The Obama administration announced last week that it would join Europeans, Russia and China in talks with Iran scheduled to begin Oct. 1.

Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel peace prize winning human rights lawyer in Iran, said U.S. officials should make human rights a focus of the discussions.

"I believe that if any U.S. officials meet with their Iranian counterparts, they should not only negotiate on the subject of nuclear enrichment but also keep the issue of human rights at the very center of their discussions," she said in a statement made available to The Washington Times.

Payam Akhavan, a former U.N. war crimes prosecutor and co-founder of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, said, "My basic view is that if human rights and democracy is off the table, it will be taken as a signal of approval and acquiescence in the atrocities that have been committed. It will be seen as a slap in the face of the democratic movement in Iran."

Mr. Akhavan, who was a classmate of President Obama at Harvard Law School added, "Even from a pragmatic point of view it is not wise to focus exclusively on the nuclear file because that is what Ahmadinejad has used to make him the champion of Iranian sovereignty against foreign meddling, whereas if there is solidarity with the democracy movement it will be seen as solidarity with the Iranian people."

The Iranian government has sought to portray the protests as somehow engineered by the West.

"Obama has been wise to deprive Ahmadinejad of a pretext to say that these protests are all part of a U.S. conspiracy," Mr. Akhavan said. "The point now is Ahmadinejad has lost legitimacy at home, so he is desperately seeking this abroad."

- *Eli Lake contributed to this story.*