

Iraqis 'repulse' ground strike along central sector

Baghdad jets launch attack on Iranian nuclear power plant

Nicosia: Iraqi warplanes yesterday bombed an unfinished Iranian nuclear power plant on the Gulf coast, killing and wounding staff and causing damage, the Iranian news agency, Irna, reported.

The attack on the Bushehr plant was "in blatant contempt of international conventions including the Geneva protocol of 1970," Irna added.

News of the bombing came as Iraq claimed to have repulsed an Iranian offensive along the heavily-defended central sector. It was the first ground offensive reported by either side in the last few months as the UN pushed efforts to secure a ceasefire in the seven-year conflict.

Construction of the two nuclear power generation units at Bushehr was started by the West German firm, Kraftwerk Union (KWU), in the mid 1970s, but work was halted after the 1979 revolution.

Iraq also announced that its aircraft had mounted a destructive raid on an Iranian chemical complex at Bushehr, and Baghdad Radio quoted President Saddam Hussein as congratulating the air force commander on the destruction

of "the complex that Iran had strived to construct since the era of the Shah . . ."

The Bushehr plant had been attacked by Iraq before — the last time in March, 1985, when French-made Exocet missiles launched by Iraqi aircraft flying over Gulf waters hit several thick concrete walls.

Iraq had planned to finish at least one of the units in the Bushehr plant, but there has so far been no agreement with KWU on resuming construction.

Iraq has an air force base at Bushehr, which is on the northern Gulf coast, 150 miles from the Iraqi border and near the Kharg island oil terminal.

In Baghdad, meanwhile, a military communique said that three Iranian infantry battalions attacked Iraqi positions 75 miles east of the capital early yesterday and were beaten back with heavy losses.

"Large numbers of enemy corpses are still littering the valleys in the area," the communique said, adding that only a few of the attackers were able to flee.

It said the Iranian infantrymen were supported by tanks in the offensive.

Analysts estimated the Iranian force at some 2,500 men and said it had attacked in hilly terrain on the central front, which is always heavily defended.

Iraq has foreshadowed a big offensive for the last week and Iraq on Monday said its armed forces were on full alert to crush any attack.

Military sources in the Gulf anticipated that Iraq would mount another full-scale offensive on the southern front against Iraq's port of Basra.

Iraq launched a big thrust towards Basra at the end of last year, taking heavy losses in edging close to the city on the Shatt al-Arab waterway between the warring countries.

The size of the Iranian attacking force on the central front suggested it was not the start of a big offensive, but more probably a probing attack, observers said yesterday.

After the attack on Basra, the focus of the war shifted to the waters of the Gulf with each side attacking shipping. Iraq hit three ships on Sunday and Monday in retaliation for Iraqi air raids on tankers shuttling oil along the Iranian coast. — Reuter.