

Bush denies preparing attack against Iran

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By Edward Luce in Washington

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George W. Bush on Friday sought to deny widespread rumours his administration was preparing some kind of military action against Iran. Mr Bush confirmed a report in Friday's Washington Post that he had authorised US troops to shoot and kill Iranian operatives in Iraq, but denied this was a prelude to stronger action.

"We believe we can solve our problems with Iran diplomatically," said the US president. "It makes sense that if somebody is trying to harm our troops, or stop us from achieving our goal, or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them."

But the US president's relatively emollient comments are unlikely to quell speculation about the reasons behind the recent escalation of White House rhetoric towards Iran. In his prime time address on the "new way forward in Iraq" two weeks ago, Mr Bush pledged to "interrupt the flow of support [for extremists in Iraq] from Iran and Syria...We will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."

In his State of the Union address to the joint houses of Congress on Tuesday, he lumped Iran with al-Qaeda. "It has also become clear that we face an escalating danger from Shia extremists who...take direction from the regime in Iran. The Shia and Sunni extremists are different faces of the same totalitarian threat."

Last week, Mr Bush ordered a second US aircraft carrier to the Gulf and the deployment of more Patriot missiles in US military bases there. Richard Haass, former head of policy planning at the State Department in the first Bush administration, said the US president was leaving both the diplomatic and military option open.

"You could interpret Bush's recent actions towards Iran in two ways – either he is increasing pressure on the regime in order to soften it up for talks over its uranium enrichment plans, or this is classic gunboat diplomacy in which the US is preparing for some kind of punitive action," said Mr Haass. "My guess is that Mr Bush's actions leave room for either scenario and the Bush administration remains divided over which to pursue."

Both Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, and Bob Gates, secretary of defence, are thought to be pushing the White House to open talks with Iranian, having softened it up with the recent application of United Nations-approved economic sanctions on Iran and the beefing up of US naval forces off the Iranian coast.

"The Bush administration believes that Iran sees the US as a kind of paper tiger, and this is Washington's answer to that," said Afshin Molavi, at the New America Foundation in Washington. "The danger to this strategy is that it carries the risk of accidentally leading into some kind of military confrontation."

However, others in the Bush administration, notably Dick Cheney, who last year warned Iran that it would face "meaningful consequences" if it continued to foment violence in Iraq, are thought to be arguing for the military option.

This interpretation is put forward by leading Democratic lawmakers on Capitol Hill, who have sought – but not received – assurances that the Bush administration has no plans to extend its military operations in Iraq across the border to Iran.

Meanwhile, in a short statement to commemorate International Holocaust Day on Friday, Iran was the only country Mr Bush cited by name: "Remembering the victims, heroes, and lessons of the Holocaust is particularly important today as Holocaust denial continues, urged on by the Iranian regime, which perversely seeks to call into question the historical fact of the Nazis' campaign of mass murder," he said.

Additional reporting by Guy Dinmore

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