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Iran 'Will Be Dealt With,' Bush Says Bid to Start at U.N., President Says

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President Bush told newspaper editors in Washington yesterday that Iran "will be dealt with, starting through the United Nations" if it does not stop developing nuclear weapons and begin total cooperation with international inspectors.

Bush said he will encourage allies to insist to the Iranians that they live up to commitments to cooperate with U.N. inspectors and end any enriching and reprocessing of uranium.

"The Iranians need to feel the pressure from the world that any nuclear weapons program will be uniformly condemned -- it's essential that they hear that message," he said. "The development of a nuclear weapon in Iran is intolerable, and a program is intolerable. . . . Otherwise, they will be dealt with, starting through the United Nations."

Earlier this month, Iran pledged to speed up cooperation with the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency, but called for an end of inspections by June.

The language was reminiscent of comments Bush made about Iraq long before the war, and to admonitions he has issued to Syria. Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, was part of the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address in 2002.

Bush said last July that Iran and Syria "will be held accountable" if they failed to cooperate more fully with the administration's campaign against terrorism.

Administration officials said they have no plans to attack Iran, and that Bush's policy on Tehran had not changed. But the remarks offered a window into Bush's long-range view of relations with Tehran. He usually speaks from a text but aides said he wanted to speak yesterday without a script, using just a list of topics he wanted to cover.

The administration said in October it was not pursuing a policy of government change in Tehran. But the White House has alternated between a confrontational and conciliatory stance, and Bush's comment could inflame relations with Iran.

Bush, speaking at an Associated Press luncheon during a Newspaper Association of America convention, said he believes that the war with Iraq will eventually result in a safer Middle East. He said he has no intention of backing away, despite rising casualties among U.S. troops. He said the people of Iraq are "looking at America and saying, 'Are we going to cut and run again?'"

"That's what they're thinking, as well -- and we're not going to cut and run if I'm in the Oval Office. We will do our job. I believe that people yearn to be free," he said. "I believe freedom in the heart of the Middle East is an historic opportunity to change the world."

Bush warned the editors that the United States "is a battlefield in the war on terror" and said he can understand public fears of a terrorist attack before the November election. "This is a hard country to

defend," he said. "Our intelligence is good. It's just never perfect, is the problem. We are disrupting some cells here in America. We're chasing people down. But it is a -- we've got a big country."

On Tuesday evening, Bush told Republican congressional leaders during a meeting at the White House that it was all but certain that terrorists would attempt a major attack on the United States before the election, according to a congressional aide. The leaders were struck by Bush's definitiveness and gravity, the aide said.

Still, Bush told the editors, the administration is "making good progress in the defense of America."

"If al Qaeda were a board of directors, the chairman and vice chairman might still be out there, but the middle management is gone," he said.

Bush was asked about an AP poll released yesterday showing that two-thirds of the 1,001 adults surveyed thought it was likely that a terrorist attack would be carried out in the country before the election. In answering, he referred to last month's train bombings just days before Spain's national election. The blasts killed 191 people and injured more than 2,000, and were blamed for the ruling party's loss of power.

"I can understand why they think they're going to get hit again," he said. "They saw what happened in Madrid. This is a hard country to defend."

The president's sober assessment stood in contrast to his usual practice of stressing progress in the war on terrorism, and reflected the rising chaos that viewers see on their television screens from Iraq and elsewhere.

Bush reminded the editors in his opening remarks that the nation is fighting "a war that is different because it's hard to really see the enemy."

"The thing that's interesting and different about this -- well, it's not interesting, it's frightening -- about this war, is America is a battlefield in the war on terror," he said. "That's what's changed. We're now a target."

Bush was asked during the 44-minute appearance about yesterday's suicide bombing at Saudi Arabia's national police headquarters, and called the attack "a reminder that there are people that would like -- I don't want to guess their intentions. I think they'd like to overthrow the ruling government."

"There's no negotiations with these terrorists," he said. "You know, you don't sign a treaty with people who are -- who don't believe in rules, people who don't have a conscience."

Before turning to serious topics during the question period, Bush began by telling the editors that the nation was enjoying growing prosperity, and jokingly opened by addressing them as "members of the Politburo." He cut off a question about Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), saying, "I'm not going to talk about my opponent here."

Staff writer Robin Wright contributed to this report.