

# George Bush's secret hostage negotiations

by Our Special Correspondent

Washington is once again in the midst of a secret deal with the terrorist regime of Iran. Officially, the aim is to obtain the release of Western hostages held in Lebanon and other locations by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah organization. In reality, the secret deals, as during the heyday of Oliver North's "Arms for Iran" operation, are aiming at shoring up the terrorist regime.

Reports about secret negotiations between the United States and Iran reached a peak by the end of February, when the *Teheran Times*, a mouthpiece of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, ran an editorial announcing that 1990 would be the year when "the hostages are to be released." Days later, several advisers to Iranian President Hashemi-Rafsanjani, including Hezbollah spiritual guide Hussein Fadlallah, suddenly voiced their concern that the taking of hostages was "un-Islamic."

Playing the game, White House spokesman Martin Fitzwater commented on March 5 and March 7 that the United States was committed to "keep open all lines of communications, including with Iran," with those countries that can influence the hostage-takers. While George Bush personally went on record on March 4 to deny any direct negotiations between the two countries, White House officials said that Washington was willing to start official negotiations. On March 8, Fitzwater relayed Bush's feeling that he "felt encouraged" by Iranian reactions to this.

The ongoing negotiations, in fact, date back to the very first days after Bush's election as President, and are directly connected to his decision to impose a political coverup on the death of 270 people on Dec. 21, 1988, in the crash of PanAm Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. By March 1989, a deal had been struck: In exchange for Washington's preventing Syria and Iran from being branded as the brains behind this act of mass murder, both countries were to work for the release of the hostages. Syria fully agreed to that deal, with far-reaching consequences. By August 1989, when Hashemi-Rafsanjani became Iran's new President, Iran too came on board. In mid-August, in a first gesture of good will, the U.S. obtained the release of 15 Iranian Revolutionary Guards who had been seized a year earlier by the Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea. In mid-October 1989, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati was meeting in Algiers with American and Algerian representatives. On Oct. 23, Rafsanjani gave a press conference indicating willingness to reestablish

"normal relations" with the United States. By early November, Bush decided to release \$567 million of frozen Iranian assets. By early December, \$40 million was made available to some of the victims of the Iranian Airbus shot down in July 1988 by the *USS Vincennes* in the Persian Gulf.

The deal was abruptly stopped in December. The early December parliamentary victory of the Mohtashemi radical group, combined with the U.S. invasion of Panama, had led to an upsurge of anti-Americanism. Rafsanjani could not, or did not want to deliver any more. By January, Washington told both Algeria and Pakistan cease their mediation efforts. Back to square one?

## Ransom money and weapons

No hostage has yet been released, even though there is a likely prospect that Terry Anderson, kidnaped on March 16, 1985, may be freed around the fifth anniversary of his captivity. Meanwhile, Washington has paid. Not only did it unfreeze Iranian assets, but it has delivered weapons, too. But Bush is cleverer than Reagan: There has been no direct delivery from the United States. Instead, third countries have been asked to help out.

A crucial one has been Communist China. In exchange for Washington's breaking with the Western solidarity against China after the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, Beijing delivered weapons to Iran. By November, the new generation of Chinese Silkworm missiles appeared on the Iranian coast. By January, according to diplomatic sources, Iran received a couple of the Chinese-made medium-range M-9 missiles. In keeping with Washington's public stand against the proliferation of medium-range missiles, China will not deliver such missiles to Iran; it just shipped some to allow the Iranian military industry to start producing some for itself! Likewise, Pakistan was called on to help Iran militarily. This led to the sudden rebirth of the Iranian naval forces, which had been severely depleted by the war with Iraq. Most of the ships which had been damaged, have now been repaired in Pakistani shipyards.

According to intelligence sources, a financial package of up to \$10 billion has been promised by Washington to Teheran. The ransom money will take the shape of massive economic investment. Indeed, Iran's new five-year plan calls for at least \$27.6 billion in foreign investments—including the \$12 billion of Iranian assets frozen in the United States. The rest would be expected to come from West Germany, France, England, Japan, and South Korea. On Jan. 30, the West German Economic Ministry announced that it was raising its Hermes Export Credit guarantee to 500 million deutsche marks. In February, the South Korean energy minister committed his country to take a share of the multibillion-dollar contract for the completion of the Bandar Khomeini petrochemical complex initiated by Japan's Mitsui. Mitsui pulled out last November. On Feb. 28, the French company Technip announced that it would take the other shares of the project.