

Massive PR offensive to target Iran

Bush White House requests funds to wage war propaganda

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THE Bush Administration has made an emergency request to the US Congress for a seven-fold increase in funding to mount a huge propaganda campaign against the Tehran Government.

In a further sign of the worsening crisis between Iran and the West, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the \$US75 million (\$A101 million) in extra funds, on top of \$10 million already allocated for this year, would be used to broadcast US radio and television shows into Iran, help pay for Iranians to study in America and back democracy groups inside Iran.

US officials acknowledge the limits of such a campaign, but the State Department is determined to bring in measures such as extending the government-run Voice of America's Farsi service from a few hours a day to round-the-clock coverage.

The sudden budget request, which follows an outlay of only \$4 million over the past two years, is to be accompanied by a diplomatic drive by Dr Rice to discuss Tehran's suspect nuclear weapons program. She is to begin with a visit to Gulf states.

Ms Rice told the Senate foreign affairs committee that Iranian leaders "have now crossed a point where they are in open defiance of the international community. "The US will actively confront the aggressive policies of the Iranian regime. At the same time, we will work to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom ..."

The US is to increase funds to Iranian non-governmental bodies that promote democracy, human rights and trade unionism. It began funding such bodies last year for the first time since Washington broke off ties with Iran in 1980.

A US official said all existing citizens' groups and non-governmental organisations in Iran had been heavily infiltrated by the Tehran Government, so the US wanted to help build new dissident networks. US officials depicted the new pro-democracy spending as just one side of a multifaceted diplomatic offensive aimed at pressuring Tehran.

They said Dr Rice would make Iran a focal point of talks with Middle East leaders in her tour next week, put it centre-stage at the upcoming Group of Eight meeting in Moscow, and call a meeting of NATO political directors in late March or April to discuss policy on Iran.

US propaganda efforts in the Middle East since the September 11 attacks have been relatively unsuccessful. Analysts say its Arabic news station al-Hurra (the Free One) is regarded with suspicion and has poor listening figures.

A senior US official said there was “a broad degree of concern” in the Middle East and around the world about recent actions taken by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and that the proposed US offensive had been greeted “very enthusiastically”.

The crisis between Iran and the West worsened on Tuesday when Iran said it had resumed small-scale uranium enrichment, a step towards nuclear weapons capability.

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