

BLAST OFF! WE CAN HIT IRAN, WARNS SHARON

IN the week when Israel successfully test-fired its latest Arrow rocket, Ariel Sharon hinted that military action could halt Iran's nuclear programme.

"Such a capability exists," the Israeli prime minister said.

Sharon added that Israel would not sit idly by if diplomacy fails.

"Israel, and not just Israel, cannot accept a situation in which Iran has nuclear weapons," he said.

"Israel is not helpless and is taking all the steps it needs to be taking."

Foreign experts speculate that Israel, which bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981, could take similar action against Iran if it believes the Islamic republic is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons.

Former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week joined the clamour for a pre-emptive strike on Iran.

"I will continue the tradition established by Menachem Begin, who did not allow Iraq to develop such a nuclear threat against Israel, and by a daring and courageous act gave us two decades of tranquillity," Netanyahu said. "I believe that this is what Israel has to do." The situation was made more serious by an announcement by a Iranian news agency that Iran would begin construction on TWENTY nuclear reactors.

Work will begin in March. One of them is to be funded by Russia at a cost of \$1 billion. Iran already has a reactor under construction at Bushehr.

Israeli officials called it a "very dangerous move."

A senior US official called on the international community to condemn "Iran's disruptive role" in the search for Israeli-Arab peace.

Nicholas Burns, the under-secretary of state for political affairs, said: "When Palestinians and Israelis are rightfully celebrating the benefits of Gaza withdrawal and the opening of the border crossing at Rafah, Iran is moving in the opposite direction by encouraging terrorism."

Israel considers Iran its greatest threat and has been working to counter the Iranian Shahab missiles, which Tehran says can reach Israel.

As a consequence, Israel carried out a successful test of its Arrow missile defence system. An Arrow missile intercepted and destroyed a target similar to Iran's long-range Shahab-3 missile.

The test was launched from an air force base in the centre of Israel and struck a target over the Mediterranean.



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