

## Defiant N Korea vows to confront US

### Bush confident of diplomatic resolution to nuke tension

AP, Seoul

Showing no willingness to ease tensions over its nuclear weapons programme, North Korea vowed Wednesday to build an army-based "powerful nation" and defy pressure from the United States.

North Korea said it fears a possible US military attack, but President Bush said he was confident the North's nuclear issue can be resolved through diplomacy.

"This is not a military showdown. This is a diplomatic showdown," Bush said Tuesday.

North Korea, in its New Year's Day message, called on its people to unite under "the banner of the army-based policy" and build a "powerful nation" to counter a possible US invasion. The reality is that North Korea is impoverished and dependent on outside food aid, much of it supplied by the United States via the UN World Food Programme.

"The United States is now becoming all the more frantic in its

moves to stifle (North Korea), openly clamouring about a pre-emptive nuclear attack on it," said the message, carried on the country's foreign news outlet, Korean Central News Agency.

The English-language message did not mention rising international concern over Pyongyang's decision to reactivate its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, but stressed the importance of uniting around the country's military.

In an apparent effort to take advantage of an upsurge in anti-US sentiment in South Korea, the message urged "all the Koreans in the North and the South and abroad" to join in confronting the United States.

US and South Korean officials say their alliance is strong, though North Korea often has tried to drive a wedge between them.

Some South Koreans worry that the nuclear dispute could trigger armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula, the world's last Cold War frontier. More than two million troops

are massed on both sides of the Korean border, while about 37,000 US troops are stationed in South Korea.

South Korean President-elect Roh Moo-hyun, who won a December 19 vote partly because of surging anti-US sentiment among his people, on Tuesday warned against "blindly following US policy".

Roh supports outgoing President Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine" policy of engaging North Korea. They believe dialogue is the only viable way to resolve the North's nuclear issue peacefully.

South Korea sent a senior diplomat to Beijing yesterday to try to win Chinese support in persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions. Lee Tae-sik, South Korea's deputy foreign minister, will meet Chinese Vice-foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on Thursday, South Korean officials said.

US and South Korean deny a rift is developing between the two close allies over the nuclear dispute.

But in the past two days, both

Roh and Kim have expressed concern that Washington might impose heavy economic pressure on Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions, and this could backfire and harden the North's stance.

Anti-US sentiment was evident on the streets of Seoul on New Year's Eve, when about 22,000 South Koreans gathered near the US Embassy to protest the deaths of two teenage girls accidentally killed in June by a US military vehicle.

Two US soldiers whose vehicle killed the girls were cleared of negligent homicide charges in US military courts last month.

Some protesters shouted for an end to the US military presence in South Korea.

Tensions over North Korea's nuclear ambitions intensified Tuesday when Pyongyang expelled two UN inspectors monitoring its nuclear facilities and signalled it might pull out of the global nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

## Blair sees Iraq war, terrorist strikes in 2003

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair listed Iraq, North Korea, the Middle East and al-Qaeda among "difficult and dangerous" problems Britain faced in the coming year during a New Year's message yesterday.

The threat of war, terrorist attacks and economic uncertainty pose major challenges both at home and abroad, he said, but insisted that "Britain is well placed to face up to them."

His hard-headed assessment of the 12 months ahead cited the threats posed by Iraq, al-Qaeda, the Middle East and North Korea.

Those threats will not help the faltering world economy, Blair warned.

Blair, Washington's main ally in the build-up to possible war against Iraq, said President Saddam Hussein must be disarmed because failure "would make the world a very dangerous place in the future".

The Middle East peace process must be pushed forward whatever the problems, he added.

No one should think that Britain's leading role in the war on terror marked the country out as a target for al-Qaeda and their like, Blair said.

Blair said al-Qaeda was a "difficult enemy, loosely organised, operating in many countries... fanatical, extreme, with no respect for human life."

## Iraq urges Arab world to copy DPRK defiance

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq urged the Arab world yesterday to take inspiration from fellow "axis of evil" member North Korea, as US President George Bush voiced hope the Iraqi weapons stand-off could still be settled without bloodshed.

"We Arabs need to revise our behaviour towards the United States, as North Korea has done (by re-launching its nuclear programme in the face of stiff US criticism), to be respected," said Ath-Thawra, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party in Baghdad.

Meanwhile, UN arms inspectors embarked on the 33rd day of their hunt for Iraq's alleged prohibited arms yesterday.

At least two teams left their Baghdad headquarters in the Canal Hotel in four-wheel drive vehicles, an AFP correspondent said.

One team went to a repair centre for cars and heavy goods vehicles in Al-Khadra district in western Baghdad.

The other visited Al-Harith Co. in the vast Al-Taji military complex north of the capital.

Around 30 activists from Voices in the Wilderness, a joint US-British campaign to end the economic sanctions against the people of Iraq, were waiting for the teams as they left their compound.

The activists sang peace songs, waving a banner reading "New Year's resolution: peace - no attack on Iraq" and wearing T-shirts with the slogan "War is not the answer" in an incident-free protest.

Experts from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resumed arms inspections in Iraq on November 27 after a four-year break.

In the United States, a spokesman said Tuesday that a US Army infantry division of up to 17,000 troops had been given orders for deployment to the Gulf region, the largest such deployment since the Gulf War 11 years ago.

In Tokyo, the major newspaper Mainichi Shimbun quoted government sources as saying Japan was considering a new law to help provide logistic support to a US-led attack against Iraq.

## Death toll in Philippine blast rises to nine

AFP, Cotabato

The death toll in a New Year's Eve grenade attack in the southern Philippines has climbed to nine, with 32 others injured, the military said Wednesday.

A manhunt has been launched for the lone perpetrator who lobbed the fragmentation grenade into a row of stalls selling firecrackers on Tuesday, setting off a series of explosions that led to the casualties in Tacurong city, army spokesman Captain Onting Alon said.

Initial police reports after the blast had placed the number of deaths at six and seven other wounded.

"So far no one has claimed responsibility and the number of fatalities may still increase because many of the 32 injured are in serious condition," Alon said.

Meanwhile, the number of firecracker-related injuries this year has fallen by almost 50 percent from last year's figure of 502, national police deputy director for operations Vidal Querol said.

"We were able to reduce the number of injuries to firecrackers by almost one half. That is a big achievement," Querol said over DZBB radio.

He said there had also been no complaints against police officers indiscriminately firing their guns into the air to usher in the New Year. Last year, seven policemen were dismissed from the force for firing their guns.

Last year, three people were killed and 502 others were injured by firecrackers and stray bullets in New Year celebrations in the Philippines.

## India ready for any challenge from Pakistan: army chief

AFP, New Delhi

India's new army chief General Nirmal Chander Vij yesterday said the military was prepared to meet any challenge from nuclear rival Pakistan.

Speaking to reporters after officially taking charge as India's 21st army chief, Vij said: "We don't have to brag about anything... but we are prepared to meet any challenge from across the border."

He said an "unrelaxed vigil" would be maintained across the Indian zone of Kashmir.

"As a part of its strategic relocation the army will not lower its guard in Jammu and Kashmir and maintain a high alert," he said.

India announced in October the redeployment of thousands of troops from its border with Pakistan who were sent there after an attack on the Indian parliament in December 13, 2001, which it blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups.

The pullback did not relate to Kashmir, which is divided and claimed by both countries.

Asked about his priorities as army chief, Vij said: "The foremost is that the army has to consolidate on the gains made during the deployment."

Commenting on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's recent remark that Pakistan could step beyond conventional warfare if it had to defend its territory, Vij said "no responsible army chief could make such a statement."

He said the army would cooperate with the state government in Kashmir to fight insurgency and restore normalcy as well as assisting the government with civic action to help local people.

## 'Few signs of life on cyclone-hit Solomon Islands'

AFP, Auckland

The first plane to fly over cyclone battered Tikopia in the Solomon Islands reported massive destruction and few signs of life, New Zealand's TV3 reported here yesterday.

The station's cameraman Jeff Mackley flew over the island, struck Saturday by Cyclone Zoe, from Vanuatu.

"It's the worst damage I have ever seen," he said.

There were few signs of life. Tikopia, which is believed to have a population of around 2,000, has been cut off since just before the storm hit.

The TV3 pictures showed most of the forest stripped bare on the picturesque volcanic island. The few houses that could be seen were also destroyed.

## Death toll from Moscow cold climbs to 215

AFP, Moscow

Four more people froze to death in the Russian capital overnight, bringing the death toll since the beginning of winter to 215, Interfax news agency quoted Moscow medical services as saying on yesterday.

A total of 39 people suffering from hypothermia were hospitalised over the New Year as the temperature dropped during the night to minus 25 Celsius (minus 13 Fahrenheit), Interfax said.

The intense cold, which persisted on yesterday morning, kept many people away from the New Year festivities in Moscow. The number of revellers was well below the 500,000 the city authorities had expected to turn out for firework displays and rock concerts on the streets of the capital.



Indonesians hold candles as they celebrate New Year's Eve in Jakarta on Tuesday. Thousands of people gathered to herald the year 2003.

## New Year celebrated amid tight security

### Fireworks explosion kills 28 in Mexico

REUTERS, New York

New Year's Eve revellers around the world parted amid tight security, but the celebrations were marred by a fireworks explosion in Mexico reported to have killed at least 28 people.

Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers - estimates ranged up to one million - and tourists gathered to see the famous ball drop at midnight in Times Square without incident.

In Mexico, Televisa television network reported that an explosion and fire in a street market packed with fireworks stalls had killed 28 people and injured more than 50 in the port city of Veracruz. The first count of the dead was 15, but more bodies were found as additional buildings were searched.

All of New York's half-million or more revellers had to pass through metal detectors. Otherwise, normal precautions were taken with thousands of extra police on duty, mailboxes and trashcans removed and manhole covers welded shut.

In a New Year message from his ranch in Crawford, Texas, President Bush vowed to "secure America, win the war on terrorism, focus on education, promote compassion, create new jobs and ensure the economic security of all our citizens".

At Camp Doha in the Kuwaiti desert, American soldiers potentially just months away from a war in neighbouring Iraq, welcomed 2003 with alcohol-free beer in line with local sensitivities of the conservative Islamic country.

While there were no warnings of any specific terrorist attacks, police in the world's major cities worked overtime to reassure the public that celebrations would be unmarred by terrorist violence.

With memories still fresh of the Bali bombings that killed more than 180 people in October, two-thirds of Indonesia's police force were

deployed around the world's biggest Muslim nation, guarding shopping and entertainment centres, mosques, churches and public facilities.

In the capital, Jakarta, key roads were closed for a street party, but despite widespread tight security thousands of Indonesians turned out to see in 2003.

Even though their famed tourist industry was devastated by the October blasts, Balinese put on a brave face at New Year's Eve festivities on the famous Kuta Beach, just blocks away from where two bombs ripped through a number of nightclubs.

In Sydney, police imposed security not seen since the 2000 Sydney Olympics, banning cars from the central business district and blocking streets for a party that culminated in a massive fireworks display over the harbour.

After a year of drought, bush fires, the Bali bombings that killed up to 90 Australians and talk of terrorism, Sydney Lord Mayor Frank Sartor praised Sydneysiders for having the courage to party openly.

On the other side of the world, an extra 1,000 policemen were deployed in Paris, bringing the total

to around 5,500. Cars were banned around the capital's famed Champs Elysees, where up to 300,000 revellers were expected.

Security fears have been heightened by arrests of suspected Islamist militants in and around Paris this month.

In Britain too, celebrations were overshadowed by fears of a possible terror strike. Scotland Yard said 2,000 police officers were patrolling London with anti-terror squads on a heightened state of alert.

London's traditional outdoor party in Trafalgar Square, where 60,000 people usually celebrate, was cancelled because of roadworks, so the bash moved indoors to the Millennium Dome, where 50,000 revellers danced in the New Year.

In Russia, 250,000 policemen patrolled the streets to prevent violence among tens of thousands of people partying outside despite the extreme cold.

In Berlin, about one million Germans marked the New Year in a 1.5-mile street party on both sides of the landmark Brandenburg Gate.



## Global warming bringing earlier spring

AFP, Paris

Suspicions that global warming is already affecting the seasons and wildlife have been backed by new research which also suggests that, a century or so from now, spring will begin almost a month earlier than now.

University of Texas biologist Camille Parmesan sifted through dozens of studies that described the historic distribution of more than 1,700 species of plants, birds, insects, amphibians, fish, sea invertebrates and zooplankton.

Her team discovered that the range limit of species is shifting northward at 6.1 kilometres per decade on average.

That figure coincides with climatologists' warnings that lower latitudes that are too cold for most of the planet's wildlife are now warming quickly and starting to retreat.

In addition, "spring events," such as the return of migrating species and egg-laying, are advancing by 2.3 days per decade on average.

"This suite of analyses generates

'very high confidence' ... that climate change is already affecting living systems," Parmesan's team reports Thursday in Nature, the British science journal.

The research attempts to answer one of the big questions facing climate experts, which is whether global warming is already starting to affect the planet's inhabitants.

The UN's top expert group, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said in January 2001 that it was relatively confident that this was indeed the case, a compromise wording that reflected a squabble in its ranks between biologists and economists.

That report also said volumes of carbon dioxide (Co2) in the atmosphere had increased by 31 per cent over the past 250 years, reaching the highest levels in 420,000 years and possibly as far back as 20 million years, as a result of burning carbon-based fuels.