

India puts its nuclear command in place

PM to take care of hit button with a pledge to no 'first strike'

AFP, New Delhi

India's cabinet Saturday decided to place ultimate control of the country's nuclear forces in the hands of a political council chaired by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

It also decided that India would keep to its pledge of no "first strike" of nuclear weapons.

In a statement, it said a Nuclear Command Authority would consist of two bodies, an executive council to coordinate the administrative work chaired by national security adviser Brajesh Mishra and a political council headed by Vajpayee.

"The political council is the sole body which can authorise the use of nuclear weapons," the statement added.

India will also have a commander-in-chief from the military to manage the nuclear forces.

Sources said Indian Air Force's Air Marshal T.M. Asthana, who heads the southern air command, is likely to be appointed to the position.

The official announcement is likely to be made next week.

The statement said a "credible minimum" level of nuclear deterrent would always be maintained

and that India would retain the option of launching a retaliatory strike in case one was made against it.

India could also launch a nuclear strike against a country if it was attacked by chemical or biological weapons, the statement said.

The cabinet said India will keep to its policy of not exporting nuclear and missile technologies or materials to any country as well as maintaining a moratorium on nuclear testing.

After testing five nuclear devices in May 1998, India put a moratorium on further tests and said its stockpile was built on the policy of minimum credible deterrence and that it would follow a no-first-use rule.

Pakistan conducted rival tests the same month, but gave no such assurances.

India's missile capabilities match Pakistan's but New Delhi has numerical superiority over its South Asian rival in terms of ballistic missiles and stockpiled nuclear warheads, according to experts.

Saturday's cabinet meeting chaired by Vajpayee reviewed India's state of nuclear readiness, the strategy it will follow for a retaliatory

attack and the various stages of alert and launch.

Analysts said India's announcement of a nuclear command structure was timed to send a message to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf as he recently said Islamabad was ready to use unconventional warfare against India last year.

In a speech to army troops on December 30, General Musharraf revealed he had warned India "they should not expect a conventional war from Pakistan" if Indian troops entered Pakistan during last year's tense 10-month military standoff.

The comment was interpreted by some observers as a reference to nuclear weapons, although Musharraf did not mention nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

Musharraf later said he was referring to use of guerrilla warfare.

Military tensions between the two countries, which have fought three wars since their independence in 1947, spiralled in December when Muslim militants attacked the Indian parliament, which New Delhi blamed on a plot hatched in Islamabad.

UN to broaden arms search

AP, Baghdad

UN weapons inspectors began setting up a new office Saturday in the northern city of Mosul to broaden the range of their searches. Iraq's government declared that US funding and military training for Iraqi opposition groups violate international law and Iraqi sovereignty.

A team of experts in various weapons fields drove from Baghdad to Mosul 250 miles north in a convoy of white UN vans. The inspectors have visited sites near the city before, but they've then had to return samples and equipment to Baghdad.

The new base "will serve as a convenient location to conduct inspections, particularly in the

north," UN spokesman Hiro Ueki said before the team left for Mosul early Saturday.

The eight UN vans, followed by an ambulance, arrived in Mosul mid-afternoon, and the arms inspectors raised the blue UN flag over the Nineveh Palace Hotel, their temporary headquarters until their new base is completed.

Iraq's allegation about America interfering in Iraqi affairs came in a letter from Foreign Minister Najji Sabri to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the official daily Al-Iraq reported Saturday. It said the letter was given to Annan by the Iraqi UN mission but did not say when.

Sabri said the US financing and military training of government opponents - whom he called "mer-

cenaries" - violated international guarantees on the sovereignty of nations and amounted to aggression against an independent state.

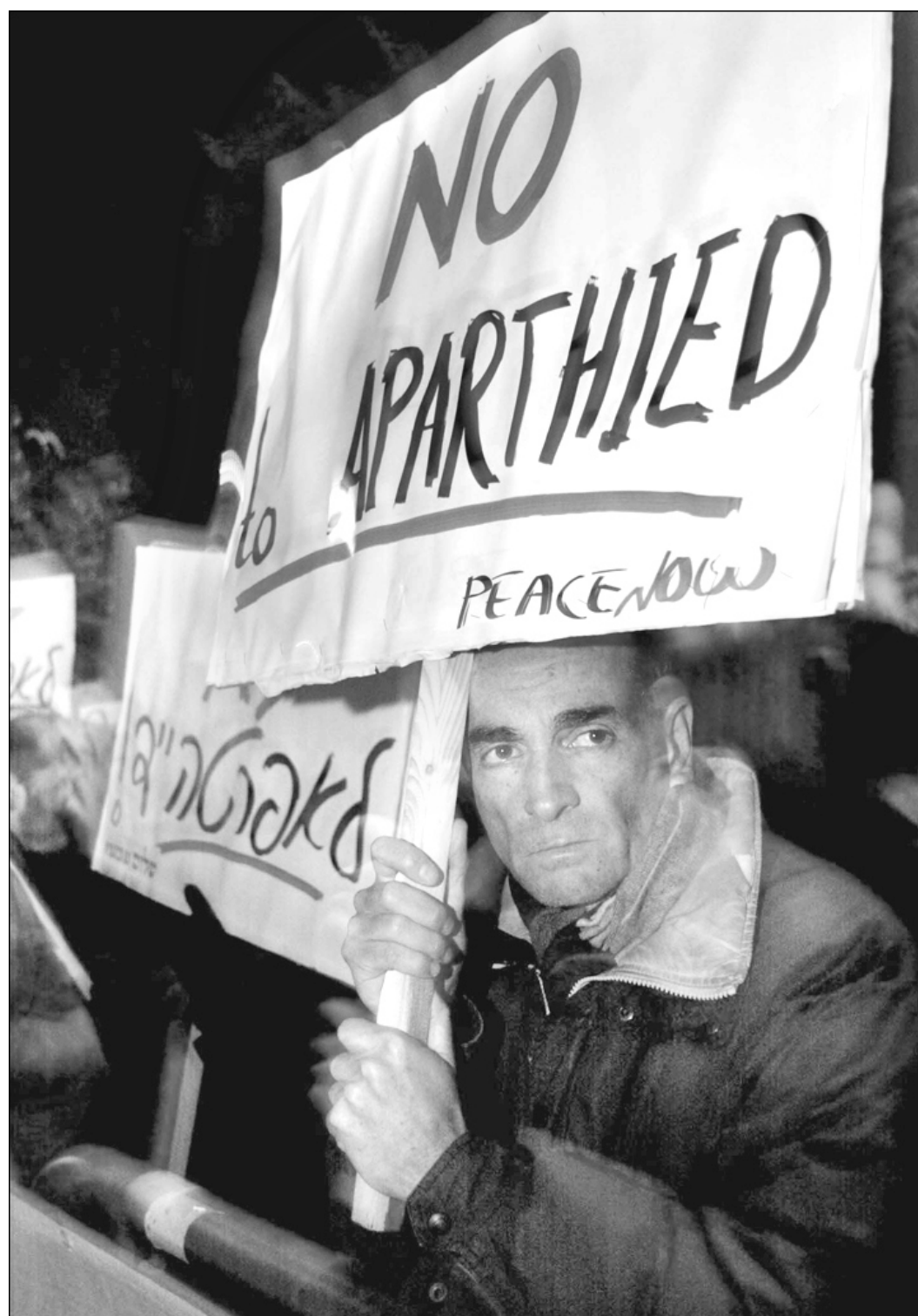
The United States has funnelled millions of dollars to Iraqi opposition groups in recent years, and helped organise a London conference by the main groups in mid-December that named a steering committee to plan an Iraqi government should President Saddam Hussein be toppled. The groups are expected to meet again in northern Iraq - a Kurdish-ruled territory out of Saddam's control - on Jan. 15.

In October, the Pentagon announced it would give military training to thousands of volunteers opposed to the Iraqi regime under an order signed by President Bush.

The training is expected to occur in Hungary.

On Friday, speaking to US Army troops in Texas, Bush said Saddam "did not even attempt to submit a credible declaration" on his alleged stockpiles of arms and weapons programs in Iraq's required statement to the UN Security Council on Dec. 8. The statement maintained Iraq has no more banned weapons.

In recent days, Bush has spoken at times of his hopes to settle the Iraq crisis peacefully and at others with renewed threats of force to disarm Saddam's regime if it does not relinquish chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and the means to deliver them.



Israeli left wing activist holds a placard "No to Apartheid" during a demonstration in front of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's house in Jerusalem on Saturday. Four hundred people from the "Peace Now" movement protested against the central election committee's decision to disbar Israeli-Arab members of Knesset (parliament) Ahmed Tibi and Azmi Bishara from running for parliament in the upcoming elections at the end of this month.

56 killed in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Fifty-six people died in Algeria in two separate attacks in attacks blamed Sunday on Islamic militants fighting government forces in this north African nation.

Thirteen members of two families were killed overnight Saturday in an isolated village near the city of Bida, 50 km south of Algiers, security services said Sunday.

Late Saturday, suspected Islamic militants ambushed and bombed a military and civil defence convoy in the Aures mountain range, 430 km southeast of Algiers, the daily Le Matin reported Sunday.

An unspecified number of assailants set off bombs with the help of acetylene-filled bottles as the convoy passed by the village of Teniet El-Abed, near the city of Batna, the paper said.

Government and hospital officials have not yet confirmed the attack nor given an official toll of the dead and wounded.

The ambush was the worst against security services since a December 17 attack left 10 security forces dead at Sidi Medjeded near Miliana, 120 km west of the capital.

Bodo rebels offer talks to Delhi

AFP, Guwahati

A tribal separatist group in India's restive northeastern Assam state has offered to hold peace talks with the federal government, police officials claimed Sunday.

"The outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was desperately trying to hold talks with the Indian government with the outfit unable to continue carrying on an armed struggle," said T.N. Tenzing, police chief of nearby Sikkim state.

Tenzing said the offer had come during the interrogation of NDFB vice president Dhiren Boro, who was arrested in Sikkim Wednesday.



A large gathering of Lankan Buddhists prays for peace on Sunday in the island's capital city, Colombo. The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, a Buddhist religious organisation, organised the rally to invoke blessings for peace in the country torn apart by decades of ethnic bloodshed. The Tamil Tigers rebels who have been waging war with the government have entered an internationally backed peace deal to end the conflict with the fourth round of direct negotiations due to start in Thailand on Monday.

Lankan peace talks set for stormy session

AFP, Bangkok

Sensitive military issues are set to make Sri Lanka's peace talks opening here Monday the most difficult round so far, diplomats said Sunday as negotiators braced for hard bargaining.

Norwegian peace brokers and the Sri Lankan government tried to play down high expectations surrounding the fourth round of talks which are expected to be dominated by security-related matters.

"The media must realise that we have embarked on a long and difficult journey," Sri Lanka's chief negotiator G. L. Peiris said Sunday shortly after arriving in Thailand.

"One has to expect thorny issues to come up. That is inherent in a process like this," Peiris said. "You can't always have a headline-grabbing meeting... we have embarked on a long and a difficult journey."

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have made it clear that they are unhappy with recent developments and rejected military demands to partially lay down heavy arms before a final peace settlement.

The peace bid hit a rough patch over the LTTE's demand for a reduction in the size of army camps in order to free thousands of private homes and property currently occupied by government forces.

The Tigers call the move a reduction of "High Security Zones", but for

Film critics name 'Pianist' top film of 2002

REUTERS, New York

Director Roman Polanski's Holocaust drama "The Pianist" claimed four awards including best picture and best director from The National Society of Film Critics on Saturday as the movie industry heads toward its top awards, the Oscars, in March.

The influential critics group also named the film's star, Adrien Brody, who portrays a Jewish pianist in Warsaw who escapes the Nazi death camps during World War II, as the year's best actor and gave "Pianist" writer Ronald Harwood the honour for top screenplay.

Diane Lane, who plays an adulterous wife in "Unfaithful," claimed the award for best actress of the year.

The 55 members of the New York-based National Society of Film Critics write for many of the United States' major newspapers and magazines, and it and other critics' groups often help narrow the list of possible nominees for Oscars.

The Oscars, or Academy Awards, are the US film industry's top honours handed out each year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, based in Los Angeles.

Runner-up to "Pianist" in the best film category was Mexico's "Y Tu Mama Tambien," a coming of age story of two boys on a road trip with an older woman, and behind that was Spain's "Talk to Her," an offbeat drama from Spanish director Pedro Almodovar that looks at how people communicate.

VHP to take aggressive stand on Hindutva

PTI, Pune

Judging by the mood of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad during its recent weeklong meet in Pune, it is clear that VHP is going to be aggressive in its Hindutva stand and especially on the issue of Ram Janambhoomi.

The VHP's mood could be gauged from the firebrand Parishad leader Pravin Togadia issuing a stern statement asking the BJP to come to aid of the Hindutva agenda. "We will not allow the BJP to budge even an inch from the ideology of Hindutva and that on this issue we are even ready to confront our Bhisma Pitamaha (Vajpayee)," Togadia said.

Ashok Singhal, international working president, dropped another bombshell on the sidelines of the meet when he said that LK Advani's rath yatra in the 1990's had damaged the cause of Hindutva by politicising the Ram Janambhoomi issue.

"Rath yatra se hamara Ram janambhoomi andolan ek pakshaka ban gaya" (rath yatra made our Ram Janambhoomi agitation a one party affair), he said.

Before the rath yatra, people from different parties used to come to their platform, but after the yatra others stopped coming as the issue got politicised, he added.

Singhal did not mince words to say that the VHP would not hesitate to confront the Centre on the issue of construction of Ram temple in

Sharon eyes truce with Palestinians after polls

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon foresees a real chance of a ceasefire with the Palestinians following the January 28 elections in Israel, Yediot Aharanot newspaper reported Sunday.

According to the paper, Sharon said late Saturday that after 27 months of the Palestinian uprising, he could discern "cracks" in the Palestinian camp.

Because of this, "after the elections, there will be a real opportunity for stopping terror" and embarking on a political process with the Palestinians, the prime minister said.

"I will not let that opportunity slip away because of the inexperience of (Labour leader Amram) Mitzna," he said, referring to the opposition chief who is Sharon's main challenger in the general elections.

DPRK calls for talks with US

AFP, Seoul

North Korea Sunday called for negotiations with the United States to end the stand-off over its nuclear programme, official media said, in an apparent softening of its rhetoric.

"The DPRK (North Korea) has consistently proposed dialogue with the US without preconditions and conclusion of a non-aggression treaty with the US," according to a commentary carried by the Korean Central News Agency.

"There is no change in the DPRK stand to settle the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula in a peaceful way."

North Korea has consistently called for talks and a non-aggression pact with the United States but Washington says it will not talk or bargain with the Stalinist state, a process it believes would be tantamount to nuclear blackmail.

Sunday's commentary appears to reflect a toning-down of the rhetoric from the North which said Saturday that the US was "entirely

to blame" for the stand-off.

But KCNA warned "the situation on the Korean peninsula will be pushed to a phase of crisis" if the United States failed to respond to its overtures.

"There is a limit to the DPRK's forbearance and patience. The US is well advised to ponder over the grave consequences to be entailed by its hostile policy to stifle the DPRK."

The stand-off was sparked by Pyongyang's decision to reactivate the Yongbyon nuclear complex which had been mothballed since 1994 under an agreement with the United States.

Reports have said Seoul may ask Washington to give North Korea a written assurance guaranteeing its sovereignty if Pyongyang first scrapped its nuclear programme, which would stop short of a formal non-aggression pact.

AP adds: South Korea honed a compromise proposal Saturday to resolve the standoff over North Korea's nuclear program, but

Pyongyang warned the situation remained "serious and unpredictable."

The pace of diplomacy was picking up, with a South Korean diplomat in Russia - an ally of the north, and talks slated in Washington early next week among the United States, the South and Japan. The South Korean proposal was expected to dominate a joint strategy session.

On Sunday, the government also announced it will send a high-level envoy to the United States later in the week for more talks on ending the crisis.

Yim Sung-joon, national security adviser, will visit Washington from Tuesday to Thursday to meet his counterpart, Condoleezza Rice, and other White House officials, South Korea's Yonhap news agency quoted the presidential Blue House as saying.

Bihar launches probe to quell unrest

AFP, Patna

The government of east India's Bihar state Sunday approved an independent probe of the killings of three youths that spurred rioting last week, officials said.

"After a series of demands by the families of the victims and opposition parties, the state government has recommended to the Indian government a Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) probe in the case," ruling RJD party president Laloo Yadav said.

The CBI is to investigate the December 28 killing of three youths by police in the state capital Patna. Officers fired on the young men they thought were criminals looting a telephone booth.

Police have denied any impropriety by the officers, but the victims' families accuse them of shooting their sons in cold blood.

One of five policemen involved in the incident has been arrested and jailed. The remaining four have gone into hiding.



Two firemen push their rubber dinghy on a flooded street in Wertheim, central Germany on Sunday. Storms in Germany claimed their third victim while the bodies of two killed in a Slovakian avalanche were found on Saturday as Europe struggled to combat floods, high winds and snowstorms during a spell of harsh winter weather.