

Glimmer of light on N Korea amidst intense diplomacy

Bush offers aid if Pyongyang shelves nuke programmes

AFP, Beijing

Top United States envoy James Kelly talked with North Korea's chief ally China yesterday after President George W Bush held out the prospect of aid for Pyongyang if it scraps its nuclear programmes.

As intense diplomacy to resolve the three-month-old standoff moved into overdrive, Kelly met officials including Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing.

But Washington's senior diplomat for Asia declined to say what he might ask Beijing to do or whether the US would offer the security guarantee or incentives Pyongyang wants in exchange for renouncing its nuclear ambitions.

"I'm very reassured we have to keep talking with each other to make sure things come out in the best possible way. That's why I'm making this very visit to Beijing," Kelly told reporters before heading behind closed doors.

"It's just an occasion to work with respective colleagues on problems that concern all of us. There's no substitute for communication."

China is considered neighbour-

ing North Korea's closest ally and while vague about its efforts to ease the situation, Beijing has offered to host any resumed dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang.

Kelly's stop in China is a crucial phase of his ongoing Asian tour as developments point to a softening of North Korea and the United States' headline positions.

The race to end the crisis gathered pace after Russia said it would send a top envoy to the North while an Australian delegation spent its second day in the isolated state - the first mission by a Western nation since the nuclear standoff erupted in October.

South Korea said it was cautiously optimistic after Bush said he was pondering reviving an aid scheme if North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il dismantled his atomic threat.

It was the clearest sign yet that Washington is prepared to offer Pyongyang incentives to back down from its nuclear program.

"The mood here is one of cautious optimism," said Kim Jong-Ro, spokesman for South Korea's Unification Ministry which handles

dealing with North Korea. "The Bush comments are a starting point of a process that may lead to negotiations."

South Korea later agreed to hold cabinet level talks with North Korea in Seoul next week. The two sides are to convene January 21-24, the first such meeting since North Korea stunned the world with threats to revive a nuclear plant capable of producing weapons grade plutonium.

Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun, who will lead the South Korean side, said earlier this month he was looking for a "breakthrough" in the nuclear standoff if the talks went ahead.

Speaking in Washington, Bush said he was considering reviving "a bold initiative, an initiative which would talk about energy and food, because we care deeply about the suffering of the North Korean people."

The plan was mothballed when Kelly travelled to North Korea in October and said he had extracted an admission from the regime that it was running a secret enriched uranium nuclear weapons program,

a charge denied by Pyongyang. That allegation triggered a deepening crisis that has seen North Korea prepare to reactivate its Yongbyon nuclear plant, frozen under a now defunct 1994 US-North Korea accord, expel UN monitors and withdraw from the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Now Bush, who has said he loathes Stalinist leader Kim and made his country a charter member of his "axis of evil," has offered Pyongyang the clear prospect of economic and political gains in return for dismantling its nuclear programmes.

"We expect them to disarm. We expect them not to develop nuclear weapons, and if they so choose to do so - their choice - then I will reconsider whether or not we will start the bold initiative," Bush said.

North Korea has insisted in recent days that it is not seeking nuclear weapons but wants a non-aggression pact with Washington and has suggested it could reverse its withdrawal from the NPT.



Members from the Bravo Company 3rd Battalion 15th Regiment from Fort Stewart, Georgia, practice their urban warfare drills during their urban warfare exercises in the Kuwaiti desert, north of Kuwait City yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

UNSC urged to expose recruiters of child soldiers

AFP, United Nations

UN officials and agency heads called Tuesday on the Security Council to expose all governments and insurgent groups which recruit child soldiers.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan told the council in open session that it had taken "the first important step" by asking him last month to publish a list of 23 parties which use combatants under 18 years of age.

The director of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), Carol Bellamy, said that "at any given time, an estimated 300,000 children across the globe are serving as child soldiers."

Annan's list included the governments and rebel groups in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Somalia and factions in Afghanistan.

In Lausanne, Switzerland, Amnesty International issued a statement on behalf of other non-governmental organisations calling for all groups using child soldiers to be exposed.

France, Germany for dual EU presidency

AFP, Paris

France and Germany on Tuesday proposed introducing a new dual presidency for the European Union, balancing the roles of the EU Council of Ministers and the EU commission and reinforcing their two nations' key role at the centre of Europe.

Under the new scheme, the EU would be led by a European Commission president, elected by the European Parliament, and another selected by the EU Council of Ministers, Chirac said.

As it currently stands, the EU presidency is held by each member state in a six-month rotating term, and the president of the European Commission, the EU's executive, is appointed by member states after approval from the European parliament.

The suggestion to introduce co-presidents, announced by French President Jacques Chirac after a dinner meeting in Paris with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, aims to give the increas-

ingly powerful bloc a stronger leadership to deal with its expansion to include 10 new members next year.

Schroeder told a press conference with Chirac that the idea would "allow not only the (European) Commission to be reinforced, but also the European parliament, which will give more legitimacy to the president."

He added that the EU's foreign policy face should go to an official who would be part of the Council of Ministers but also have a "presence" in the Commission.

The plan was to be put yesterday to current and future EU members, as well as to an EU commission - headed by former French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing - tasked with recommending reforms to EU institutions to keep pace with the bloc's enlargement, Chirac said.

His discussions with Schroeder were part of a bid to reinvigorate the historic Franco-German axis at the heart of the European Union.

The two leaders were preparing the ground for celebrations next week of the 40th anniversary of the

treaty that sealed their post-war pact.

They hope to use the January 22 ceremonies marking the 1963 Elysee treaty to relaunch the axis, with a series of initiatives aimed at cementing bilateral ties, promoting cultural and educational exchanges and coordinating policy in the EU.

By jointly putting forward the proposed change to the EU presidency, they were reasserting their claim to directing the future of the Union - despite complaints from other EU members, notably Britain and Italy, that they were being left out of the loop.

France and Germany have already made a number of shared proposals on military, tax and judicial affairs, but observers say fundamental differences remain, with Germany favouring a federal Europe with a powerful commission in Brussels, and France defending the role of the nation state.

US-India defence talks today

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

As part of their renewed focus on engaging intensively with each other, India and the USA are scheduled to hold talks today on various aspects of missile defence.

This is the third round of bilateral consultations on this issue, a foreign ministry spokesman said. The first round was held when the American deputy secretary of state, Mr Richard Armitage, visited New Delhi to begin these talks in May 2001, while the second round was held in Washington in May last year.

The US has held similar talks as part of its overall strategic defence alliance with Russia, its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies and with "friendly countries" like India, the spokesman said, but was unclear on whether such parleys were held with China and Pakistan.

Bush releases \$450m to help Russia destroy chemical arms

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush has released about 450 million dollars to help Russia destroy its most theft-prone stocks of chemical weapons, and prevent their ending up in the hands of terrorists, US officials said.

In a memorandum to Secretary of State Colin Powell released by the White House on Tuesday, Bush said he had waived restrictions imposed by Congress on such aid because it "is important to the national security interests of the United States."

The released funds would be used to build a weapons destruction plant in the Siberian town of Shchuch'ye, where two million gas-filled artillery shells and Scud missile warheads - or nearly 14 per cent of the entire Russian chemical weapons arsenal - are currently stored, the officials said.

The Shchuch'ye ammunition dump, which contains enough deadly agents to kill the world population 20 times over, is kept in barn-like shacks with relatively few safeguards, according to Richard Lugar, the incoming chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who visited the site last May.

Arms experts inspect presidential site

Time running out on Saddam, warn US, UK

AFP, Baghdad

Weapons experts inspected a key presidential site in the Iraqi capital yesterday amid US and British warnings that time is running out for Saddam Hussein to disarm.

An AFP correspondent said UN crews entered the 2.5 square kilometre Republican Palace, the site of the president's main office, but it was not known if Saddam was present.

It also houses bureaux for Special Security Forces, which protect the ruling elite, and the Republican Guard, a well-trained and loyal military force.

It was the second inspection of such a "sensitive site" since the hunt for banned weapons resumed in Iraq on November 27.

Reporters were kept out by guards as experts from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) went inside the compound with their

vehicles. Saddam's eight sprawling palaces - three of them in Baghdad - have remained high on the list of suspected hiding places for weapons of mass destruction but Iraq sees them as important symbols of its sovereignty and dignity.

Tuesday marked the start of the eighth week of what UN officials intend to be a lengthy process despite Washington and London warning Tuesday that time was short.

"I'm sick and tired of games and deception," President George W Bush said at the White House.

"So far I haven't seen any evidence that he is disarming. ... Time is running out on Saddam Hussein; he must disarm."

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw jumped to back Bush, saying in London he had been "right to put it in that way."

But other members of the European Union offered Washington little support.

French President Jacques

Chirac said after meeting German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder that their countries have "an identical approach and vision" regarding Iraq: diplomacy, but no war.

Schroeder said Germany had "the strongest possible hope and will" to see the current UN resolution in force on Iraq applied "by political pressure and not by military intervention."

European Commission President Romano Prodi, addressing the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, urged EU governments to take a common approach to avoid war in Iraq, except as a last resort.

Bush's warning appeared at odds with chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix who has said the disarmament process is still in its infancy.

Blix told the Washington Post a progress report by his staff to the UN Security Council due January 27 would mark "the beginning of the inspection and monitoring process, not the end of it."

Israeli army kills 3 in West Bank

AFP, Jenin

Three Palestinians were killed by Israeli troops in a new night of violence, as Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon continued a recovery from corruption allegations to stretch his lead in opinion polls two weeks before general elections.

One of the Israeli army's nightly sweeps for suspected Palestinian militants resulted in two deaths in the northern West Bank village of Qabatiya, south of Jenin, Palestinian security sources said.

The all too familiar pattern of Palestinian stones being met by Israeli bullets had already caused the death of another teenager in the Palestinian refugee camp of Tulkarem overnight.

In Qabatiya, the army netted two members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.



PHOTO: AFP

A US army truck carries Patriot missile batteries as it enters an Israeli army base in southern Israel Tuesday. Israel has received several Patriot missile batteries as a defence in the event of a US-led war against Iraq.

Annan hopeful of averting Iraq war

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said Tuesday he was optimistic about averting war with Iraq, if countries in the region could persuade Baghdad to disarm in line with Security Council demands.

"I am both optimistic and hopeful that if we handle the situation right and the pressure on the Iraqi leadership is maintained, and the inspectors continue their work aggressively, we may be able to disarm Iraq peacefully without going to war," he said.

Annan said the United Nations was "extremely worried about the humanitarian consequences" of military action.

"We have been doing some contingency planning, because obviously we don't want to be caught unprepared," he said. "We are worried; the consequences could be quite substantial and negative on the population and the refugees who may have to leave."

Annan said he had been in touch with "quite a lot of the leaders in the

region" about the need for them "to convince President Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership to disarm and to cooperate fully with the inspectors."

If Iraq disarmed and complied with the demands of the UN Security Council, the region may be spared another military confrontation, he said.

"I hope the Israeli leadership is listening and that countries in the region, including Turkey, are sending the same message to Iraq," Annan said. A spokesman later said Annan meant to refer to the Iraqi leadership but misspoke.

He said he had not been involved in any discussions or talks on the possibility of persuading Saddam to stand down and leave Iraq.

Asked whether he would approve of a military strike if Iraq defied the UN and refused to disarm, Annan replied: "I don't think we are there yet, so I don't want to talk about war, nor is the council talking about war."

He recalled that chief arms inspector Hans Blix and the director

general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, were due to report to the council January 27 and would visit Baghdad before then.

"The council will make a determination whether Iraq has performed or not and whether there is a breach, Annan said.

He noted that when Blix and ElBaradei briefed the council last week, they said "there were major gaps" in Iraq's December 8 declaration to the council on its nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

Blix and ElBaradei had "indicated that they would prefer Iraq to be proactive in its cooperation," and he expected them to press the Iraqis when they visited Baghdad Sunday and Monday, he said.

If they reported that Iraq had failed to cooperate with them - a possible trigger for military action - Annan said he expected the council to adopt a new resolution.

"This is a crucial and important issue," he said. "I think it is envisaged in Resolution 1441, that the council will meet a second time to

take up the matter" if the inspectors report a lack of cooperation.

"We can have a second resolution - the council will take a decision on this very pressing matter," he added.

Resolution 1441, adopted unanimously November 8, threatened Iraq with "serious consequences" if it lied about its weapons of mass destruction and failed to cooperate with inspectors who began work three weeks later.

"We will have to assume that the members of the council acted in good faith, that the issue is disarmament and that they will do whatever it takes to disarm" Iraq, Annan said.

"If disarmament were to succeed and we were to agree that Iraq has been stripped of its weapons of mass destruction, that will be the end of the story."

"If, on the other hand, it were to come out that Iraq continues to defy and disarmament has not happened, then the council will have to face up to its responsibilities and take the necessary action."

New hardware on display in Indian Army Day parade

AFP, New Delhi

India's military rolled out some of its newest hardware acquisitions, Russian-made T-90 tanks and locally-built advanced light helicopters, at a spectacular Army Day parade yesterday.

Army chief General NC Vij took the salute as contingents of a number of combat units marched past the saluting base in the Indian capital New Delhi.

In his speech, Vij, ruled out any reduction of troops or surveillance along the LoC.

Weapon systems displayed at the parade included the T-72 tank, 155mm Bofors howitzer artillery gun and the short-range ballistic Prithvi (Earth) missile, a mobile tactical jammer and an infantry combat vehicle.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian army vehicle carrying a Prithvi missile takes part in the Army Day parade in New Delhi yesterday. Army Day commemorates the late Field Marshal BC Cariappa's taking over as the first Indian commander-in-chief of the armed forces in 1949, two years after India's independence from British rule.