



PHOTO: AFP

The US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk (top) sails past vessels of Japan's Marine Self-defence Force (bottom) as it leaves its US Navy base in Yokosuka, suburban Tokyo, yesterday to monitor the Korean Peninsula. The 83,960-tonne Kitty Hawk is expected to stand by in waters near Japan, given increasing tensions in North and South Korea following Pyongyang's announcement of its withdrawal from an international nuclear accord.

Saudi deports Kuwaiti held for murder of US citizen

AFP, Kuwait City

Saudi authorities extradited yesterday a Kuwaiti citizen arrested in the kingdom for the murder of a US national during an ambush in Kuwait on Tuesday, a senior Kuwaiti security official said. The official identified the man as Sami Mohammed al-Mutairi.

"We have also found the gun" that was used in the ambush close to the major US military base, Camp Doha, 30 kilometres north of Kuwait City that left Michael Rene Pouliot dead and another American seriously wounded.

The suspect is now in the hands of Kuwait's state security, which is questioning "no less than 15 suspects," the official said.

Mutairi was one of those interrogated after the October 7 attack when two Kuwaiti gunmen killed a US marine and wounded another during wargames on Failaka island, 20 kilometres east of Kuwait City, the official said.

"He was questioned and released after the Failaka incident," the official said.

Saudi Arabia's official SPA news agency quoted a Saudi spokesman yesterday as saying a man arrested by Saudi border guards had confessed to firing at the US nationals on Tuesday.

Top Korean delegates carry on after cabinet nuke talks stall

AFP, Seoul

The top delegates from North and South Korea were meeting one-on-one late yesterday in a bid to break a deadlock in inter-Korean cabinet-level talks over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons drive, officials said.

Earlier, South Korea said the talks were stalled as working level delegates wrangled over the wording of a final declaration.

Rhee Bong-Jo, spokesman for South Korea's delegation to the talks, said the South Korean side was pushing for a concrete pledge from the North to scrap its nuclear programme to be included in the declaration but the North's delegates were opposed.

"The talks are being held in a sincere manner but there is not much progress so far," Rhee said.

Shortly afterwards, South Korean Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun and his North Korean counterpart Kim Ryong-Song met for the one-on-one talks, the Unification Ministry said.

Rhee said South Korea had been

pressuring the North to take steps "so that the nuclear issue can be resolved peacefully through dialogue."

However, North Korean delegates remained tight-lipped on the talks.

No official statement had emerged from their side since the North's chief delegate Kim said Wednesday the communist state had no intention of producing nuclear weapons "at this stage" even though it had withdrawn from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

Rhee said that the North has not gone beyond reiterating that position and stating its wish to resolve the nuclear crisis through dialogue.

However, a Pyongyang delegate has reportedly ruled out pushing the confrontation to the point of military conflict.

The cabinet-level talks, which were scheduled to discuss reconciliation and humanitarian issues, have been overshadowed by international concerns over the nuclear standoff.

At parallel inter-Korean talks in

Pyongyang on reconnecting railways severed since the 1950-53 Korean War, South Korean delegates also urged the North to take concrete steps to resolve the nuclear crisis.

The North accepted a South Korean proposal to open one of two railway lines by the end of February, according to pool reports from the North Korean capital.

However, a dispute between North Korean and the US-led United Nations Command is still stalling the project. The North refuses to recognise UNC control of the transportation corridor.

There were no reports of concessions from Pyongyang on the nuclear crisis, which North Korea has called a bilateral issue between it and the United States alone, insisting intervention by other countries would only complicate matters.

South Korea, which seeks a peaceful resolution to the deepening crisis, has offered to play a leading role in its resolution but officials here acknowledge Seoul's limited influence on Pyongyang.

Franco-German opposition to Iraq war irks US

AFP, Washington

US leaders expressed frustration Wednesday at European-led opposition to a military strike against Iraq, suggesting France and Germany in particular are ignoring the threat from Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

As the diplomatic wrangling over war headed toward an impasse, the top US general said the United States can sustain a major force in the Gulf for several months if needed.

President George W Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell led the offensive against French and German opposition to conflict.

Bush said the evidence was "incredibly troubling and disturbing" and demanded Baghdad be held to account while Powell questioned whether France and Germany were serious about disarming Iraq.

"Saddam Hussein is not disarming like the world has told him he must do," Bush said in a speech in Saint Louis, Missouri.

Bush, who has also rebuked France and Germany for their positions, said Saddam was using "lessons from the past" to thwart UN

inspectors.

The president also warned Iraqi military leaders they would face war crimes trials if they attack US troops or their own people with banned chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, Powell said comments from his French and German counterparts at the United Nations this week had hindered the efforts to disarm Baghdad, suggesting they were ignoring the threat posed by Saddam.

"Frankly, there are some nations in the world who would like to simply turn away from this problem, pretend it isn't there," he told PBS.

"They are troubled by the consequences of going down this road of the requirements of 1441, which is ultimately the use of force if Iraq does not comply."

He referred to UN Security Council resolution 1441 which warns of "serious consequences" if Baghdad does not comply.

The United States was angered after French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said there was no justification for war at the moment and that UN weapons

inspectors should be allowed to finish their work.

Germany has said it will not support conflict with Iraq under any circumstances.

French President Jacques Chirac said at a joint appearance with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in Paris that the two nations "have the same judgement on the Iraq crisis" and that "everything must be done to avoid war."

Powell said he was particularly concerned de Villepin had undermined the focus of the council's anti-terrorism meeting Monday by saying there was nothing to justify a military strike against Iraq.

Powell said he had a "candid and honest forthright exchange of views" with the French minister Tuesday.

Bush has threatened to lead a coalition without UN approval if necessary to disarm Iraq.

The White House said Bush was likely to make public additional information about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its links to terrorist groups, should he choose the military option.

The United States meanwhile

forged ahead with its military buildup, adding 20,000 reservists to the nearly already on active duty as US aircraft carriers and other warships steamed for the Gulf.

The United States is expected to have more than 150,000 troops in the region by mid-February.

General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the United States could maintain a major force in the Gulf for several months while the diplomatic battle goes on.

Myers said the US military had detected hints of unrest within Iraq's leadership, but said it was not known whether the Iraqi military would fight if there is a war.

But Iraq's 23 divisions -- around 400,000 troops -- should be regarded as a credible force, he added.

Top administration officials have encouraged Saddam to go into exile with his family, and the US military has tried to foment dissension within the leadership with e-mails, leaflets and public statements.

Ruins of prehistoric city found in China

AFP, Beijing

Chinese archaeologists have discovered the ruins of a prehistoric city dating back an estimated 4,300 years in southwest Sichuan province, state press said yesterday.

The find provided evidence that the region along the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, with the Chengdu Plain at the core, played an important role in the origin and development of Chinese civilization, experts said.

The ancient city of Yandian measures 700 metres from north to south and 500 metres from east to west, the Xinhua news agency reported.

It covers an area of more than 300,000 square-metres.

Chen Jian, an official with the relics and archaeological team in the Sichuan capital Chengdu City, said the site is next to a river at an elevation of three metres above the river bank.

This indicated that ancient people considered the availability of water and flood prevention when deciding where to build cities, he said.

Archaeologists unearthed a number of pieces of inscribed pottery, polished stone axes, chisels and spears at the site. They also found chips of human skulls on the city wall but were unable to explain how they got there.

6 Myanmar troops killed in clash with ethnic rebels

AFP, Mae Sot, Thailand

At least six Myanmar soldiers were killed yesterday in clashes with ethnic Karen rebels as 1,000 villagers in Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand fled the fighting and shelling, Thai military sources and witnesses said.

An estimated 2,000 Myanmar soldiers engaged in a prolonged firefight with 120 militants of the Karen National Union (KNU) from 9:00 a.m. (0200 GMT) near a KNU base opposite Thailand's Tak province, witnesses in Phob Phra district said.

"Six Myanmar soldiers died in the fighting and two were reportedly injured," a security source attached to a Thai army border task force told AFP.

There were no reports of any KNU casualties, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Thai villagers reported hearing heavy automatic weapons and artillery fire for several hours along the border.

Two Thai villages in Phob Phra were bombarded by seven mortars launched during the battle, causing only minor damage to three homes but forcing the evacuation of some 600 Thais into local government

buildings. Schools near the border were also closed for the day, the Thai military said.

About 500 Karen villagers also fled across the border from Myanmar, witnesses said.

Thai Major Pongsak Ma-In, in charge of the border area in Phob Phra, said the Thai army was closely guarding the frontier "in case any intruders violate Thai territory" and to try to deter further shelling.

"The Thai army has not fired back yet after the seven mortars fell in some Thai villages. Any quick reaction might hurt relations (with Myanmar), but if another series of shells falls, we will fire warning shots."

Skirmishes are common along the border and often involve ethnic rebel groups such as the KNU who oppose Yangon's military rule, or ethnic militias aligned with the junta and who stand accused of trafficking drugs along the porous border.

Officials of the KNU have said that Myanmar troops often fire rockets into Thailand to create misunderstandings between Thai authorities and ethnic groups.

Far right crashes in Dutch polls

AFP, The Hague

Dutch voters ended a year of political turbulence by turning away from the far right and back to the established parties but arduous coalition talks are ahead for the Christian Democrats who only have a narrow win over Labour.

The Christian Democrat party of outgoing Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende managed a two-seat lead over Labour with 44 seats against 42 in the 150-seat parliament, unofficial results with all the votes counted showed.

The populist right-wing Pim Fortuyn's list party, which had come from nowhere to impose itself as one of the Christian Democrats' coalition partners in the last parliament, scraped only eight seats, less than a third of the 26 it held in the previous parliament.

The political landscape that emerged from Wednesday's election, held after the collapse of the Christian Democrat-LPF coalition government after less than three months in power, is more in line with traditional Dutch politics, the media agree.

The most remarkable win was the political resurrection of the PvdA Labour party, which suffered a historic defeat in the elections last year.