

US general holds talks with Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

US General Tommy Franks, the commander likely to oversee a possible war on Iraq, began talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf here Monday, as Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali lobbied against a war during a tour of Gulf states.

US embassy officials have described the agenda for the talks as "routine consultations" on regional issues and bilateral cooperation, declining to outline specific items.

The meeting between Franks, who commands US forces in the Gulf as well as Afghanistan, and Musharraf comes hours ahead of the presentation of a key report on Iraq by weapons inspectors to the UN Security Council, of which Pakistan is a non-permanent member.

Pakistan is a key ally of the United States in its 15-month war on terrorism but is opposed to war on Iraq without UN authorisation and is issuing increasingly frequent calls for conflict to be avoided.

It has been a pivotal supporter of US-led operations in neighbouring Afghanistan since October 2001 to wipe out the Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda network they harboured.



PHOTO: AFP

A Filipino anti-war demonstrator wearing a skull masks rally outside the US embassy in Manila on Monday to condemn impending US military actions against Iraq. The protestors burned a portrait of US President George Bush and Stars and Stripes.

Israel seals off Palestinian areas ahead of polls

Sharon gears up for victory

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel imposed a total closure on the Palestinian territories on the eve of elections Monday, in which hardline Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is due to emerge the overall winner.

Meanwhile tensions were high in the Gaza Strip after more Palestinian rocket attacks, and as Israel said it could reoccupy the coastal territory as it has done most of the West Bank for the past seven months.

The army shut all borders between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip Sunday evening, as well as key border crossings it controls between the territories and Jordan and Egypt, until Wednesday morning, the day after the elections.

Palestinian militants killed six Israelis at a polling booth during leadership elections for Sharon's Likud party in November.

Tensions rose sharply over the weekend after Gaza-based militants fired home-made rockets over the border into southern Israel,

injuring one man and provoking a devastating Israeli raid into the heart of Gaza City, the deepest incursion into the densely-populated metropolis in more than two years of fighting.

Twelve Palestinians were killed and more than 60 injured in heated fighting, but militants from the radical Islamic group Hamas fired four more missiles at the Israeli town of Sderot in defiance after the army withdrew.

Palestinians accused Sharon of launching the massive raid as a means of boosting his tough image before Tuesday's general elections, which he is tipped to win on a pledge to smash the intifada, or uprising, and not engage in peace talks until the Palestinians down their weapons.

Sharon's rival Labour, led by dovish new party chief Amram Mitzna, appears headed for its worst defeat ever, slipping from 25 seats to 18 or 19, compared to Likud which is set to storm from 19 to around 33 seats in the 120-member parliament.

Tommy Lapid's secular and

centrist Shinui party is set for a spectacular parliamentary breakthrough to become the third party with 16 seats, 10 more than it currently holds.

With Mitzna stalwartly refusing to join any government led by Sharon, the hardline premier is looking to Shinui to shore up a rocky future coalition.

However, Shinui refuses to join any government with religious or extremist nationalist parties, meaning Sharon will have to jettison smaller far-right allies he has traditionally used to navigate crises stemming from the conflict or the country's worst ever economic slump.

As Sharon moved to snatch right-wing Russian immigrant voters from his erstwhile hardline allies, the National Union bloc, his aides hinted the army could reoccupy the Gaza Strip if the defiant but largely ineffectual Palestinian rocket strikes continue in the south.

"The operation that we carried out overnight Saturday is a clear

message of dissuasion, if it is not understood, we will not exclude any options including one to retake control of all the Gaza Strip," a Sharon aide told AFP.

The death toll continued to rise in Gaza even after the army withdrew Sunday, with a six-year-old boy killed by tank fire in Rafah in the south, near the Israeli-controlled border with Egypt, and a 50-year-old killed in his home by a tank shell in Khan Yunis, just to the north.

In the West Bank, the army also extended the closure of two Hebron colleges catering to more than 7,000 students which were shut down in reprisal for a series of deadly attacks by Palestinian militants in the area in past months.

The army said in a statement that the university - closed for six months - and the polytechnic had become "centres of agitation by terrorist organisations," adding that several of the Palestinians involved in recent attacks had been studying at the two campuses.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli soldiers lineup to vote at a polling station in the Gush Etzion army camp south of the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Sunday. Israeli army members began casting their votes for legislative elections in two days, the central elections committee announced.

'Pakistan should take cue from warming ties of Sino-India'

AFP, New Delhi

India on Monday told its nuclear rival Pakistan to learn a lesson from the warming ties between Beijing and New Delhi despite the bitter war the world's two most populous nations fought in 1962.

The acidic remarks came against a backdrop of recent tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats by India and Pakistan, which have fought three wars - two of them over Kashmir - since their independence from the British 56 years ago.

Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha, addressing a conference of a military think-tank, said India and China have adopted a positive approach on crucial issues through talks while addressing thorny bilateral subjects.

Fresh attack on Pak gas supply line

AFP, Lahore

A key gas pipeline in central Pakistan has exploded for the third time in a week, cutting half the gas supplies to two provinces, officials said Monday.

Two gas transmission lines in a crucial pipeline running from the Sui gas fields in desert plains some 700 kilometers (435 miles) southwest of Islamabad were "completely damaged" by the explosion late Sunday, Sui Northern Gas Pipelines (SNGPL) director of transmissions Alam Khan told AFP.

Local officials said the pipeline was ruptured by rockets, apparently fired during clashes between heavily armed tribesmen close to the site of attacks on Tuesday and Wednesday last week.

Those attacks ruptured pipelines and left more than two million consumers without gas.

"Fifty-five percent of gas supplies to Punjab and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) have been affected," Khan told AFP in the Punjab capital Lahore.

Pakistan will be erased if it uses nukes: India

PTI, London

In a stern warning, India has told Pakistan that it would be "erased from the World map", if it uses nuclear weapons against India.

"We have been saying all through, that the person who heads Pakistan today, who is also the whole and sole in-charge of that country, has been talking about using dangerous weapons including the nukes," India's Defence Minister George Fernandes said on Sunday night.

"Well, I would reply by saying that if Pakistan has decided that it wants to get itself destroyed and erased from the World map, then it may take this step of madness, but if wants to survive then it would not do so," he said.

Participating in a BBC World's phone-in programme in Hindi - Aap ki bath, BBC ke sath - Fernandes said "there has been this talk of Pakistani nuclear weapons falling in the hands of dangerous elements.

But we believe that whatever be the policy of Pakistani leadership towards India, howsoever irresponsible they may be, it is difficult to accept that they would put such weapons in the hands of individuals or organisations, who might eventually use them."

Answering to a question on infiltration of terrorists from across the border in Jammu and Kashmir, Fernandes said after Taliban and Al-Qaeda were vanquished in Afghanistan, "armed units of Taliban that fled from Kabul entered Pakistan".

"Now they were provided not only shelter by Pakistan, but all possible help, including training, which is in full knowledge of the world, America included. But how far America would be ready to impress upon Pakistan to give up such dangerous policies, is difficult to say as of today," he said.

Asked specifically what India had achieved by deploying the army on

the border, the Defence Minister said if such an action was not taken "Pakistan could have repeated the Kargil-type activity" and "we were alert against any misadventure."

He said "we were suspicious that Pakistan could take any major step, therefore, the need was to be prepared against any eventuality."

"After we deployed our army on the border, Pakistan also did the same, but did not try anything else. It was due to our deployment that they did not take any further step, and if they had tried, we would have given them a befitting reply. The target given to the armed forces here was to keep the country's borders safe, which it did well," Fernandes said.

To a question whether it was proper to use the army for counter-insurgency operations, Fernandes said personally he was not in favour of it.

UK pushes UN to issue fresh ultimatum to Iraq

US has right to attack alone: Powell

AFP, London

Britain is pressing the UN Security Council to impose a final ultimatum on Iraq after the chief UN weapons inspector reports on Monday that Baghdad is not co-operating fully with the search for weapons of mass destruction, according to The Times.

The new deadline, which could set as early as the beginning of March, is likely to dominate discussion at the Security Council this week, and "is aimed at countering the impression that an American-led war is inevitable," the paper reported Monday.

It is also regarded as a practical move since most of the US and British military forces heading to the Gulf will not be in position to fight until the end of February or the beginning of March, it added.

The new initiative for a UN deadline is similar to a six-week Security Council ultimatum issued in November 1990 to Iraq to leave Kuwait.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in a BBC interview Sunday that the inspectors should be given more time to complete their work, but suggested that it should be weeks rather than months.

An Anglo-US strategy, "which will probably determine the course and timing of any conflict", is expected to be decided when US President George W. Bush meets British Prime Minister Tony Blair at Camp David on Friday, The Times said.

The chief weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei will

submit their report on two months of inspections to the Security Council later Monday.

Blix will report that Baghdad did not account fully for its suspected weapons of mass destruction in a 12,000-page declaration submitted on December 7. He will also tell the UN that Baghdad has hampered interviews with Iraqi scientists, blocked the use of U2 surveillance flights over the country and developed missiles with a longer range than permitted, according to the newspaper report.

Meanwhile British government sources said that Iraqi leaders are trying to hamper the work of UN weapons inspectors, spying on them and delaying access to suspect sites.

Intelligence sources in Iraq indicate that offices used by the inspectors have been bugged, as have their hotel rooms and cars, the sources said Sunday, on the eve of a key report to the UN Security Council by the weapons inspectors on their first two months of operations.

The inspectors are followed around and their access to sites where arms are stocked is impeded, the British sources said.

They also suggested that Iraqi agents staged road accidents to delay UN convoys.

Iraqi scientists have been warned that they or their families could be killed if they cooperate with the UN inspectors, the sources said, adding that the scientists were being forced to hide sensitive documents at home.

S Korea sees no swift end to nuclear crisis

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea will stress to the communist North the importance of ending its nuclear crisis but expects no swift resolution, a special envoy from the South said before leaving for the North on Monday.

The mission of Lim Dong-won, special envoy of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, may be made easier after the United States said on Sunday it was ready to tell North Korea it has no intention to attack.

But the North hurled a stream of abuse at the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is planning an emergency session on the crisis, questioning his judgment and saying it was no longer in a position to discuss its atomic ambitions.

In a bid to calm nerves, Lim arrived in Pyongyang after a rare direct flight from Seoul over the demilitarized zone that has divided the Koreas since the 1950-53 Korean War.

US tests military might on Iraqi border

AFP, Near Kuwait-Iraq Border

US troops wrapped-up a two-week military operation with a blistering live-fire exercise Monday in preparation for an invasion of Iraq if Washington decides to take charge of disarming Baghdad.

Colonel Wes Gillman, commander of the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Division, hailed the operation as a resounding success signaling to US President George W. Bush his infantry and armoured forces were ready.

However, one soldier was injured during the night time live-fire battle while attempting to shoot a jammed 25 mm automatic gun out of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

A captain said the soldier had sustained facial and hand injuries and while his condition was serious, he had stabilised. His name was not released.

Gillman, who could not elaborate on the extent of the soldier's injuries, said accidents can occur with the guns mounted on Bradleys but usually after heat had built up in the barrel from constant firing.

Pressure on Nepali home minister to quit

AFP, Kathmandu

Pressure mounted Monday on Nepal's home minister to resign for failing to prevent the weekend assassination of a top police officer by suspected Maoist rebels.

A highly placed cabinet source told AFP that three ministers called for the resignation of Ram Bahadur Thapa over the killing Sunday morning of Armed Police Force chief Krishna Mohan Shrestha.

Shrestha, his wife, Nudu, and bodyguard Surya Regmi were shot dead Sunday as they took a morning walk on the outskirts of Kathmandu. He was the highest-ranking official to be assassinated by the Maoists since the rebels launched their "people's war" in 1996 to overthrow the constitutional monarchy.

Shrestha was cremated Monday on the banks of the Bagmati River in Kathmandu in the presence of high-ranking police and civilians and thousands of spectators.

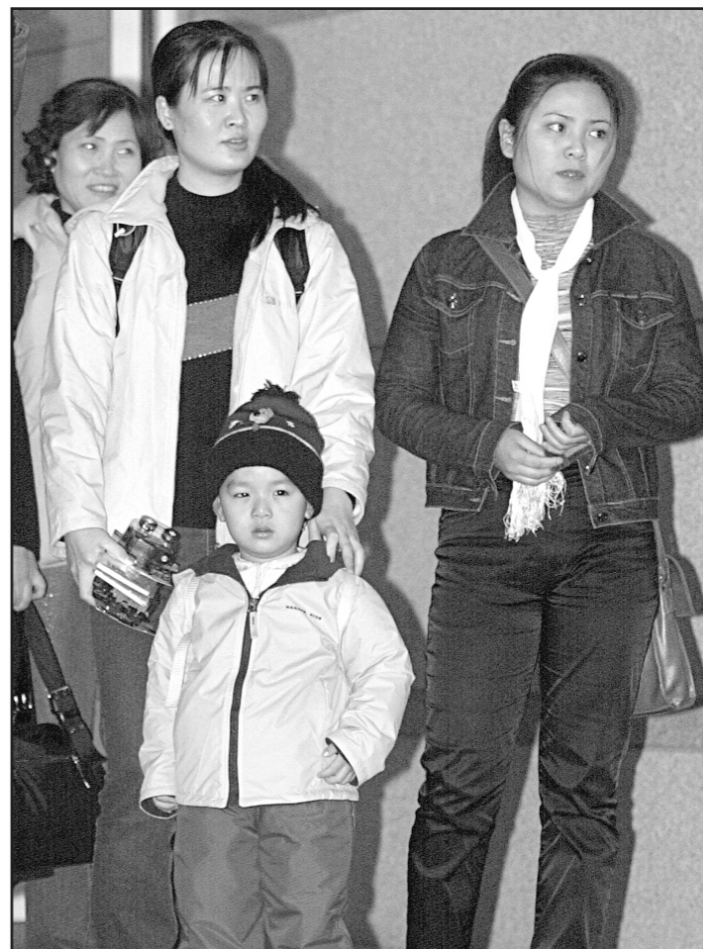


PHOTO: AFP

North Korean asylum seekers arrive at Incheon International airport in South Korea on Monday. Twenty-eight North Korean asylum seekers, who had been holed up at the South Korean embassy in Beijing, arrived at Seoul.

Bandh affects life in West Bengal

PTI, Kolkata

The 24-hour state-wide bandh called today by Socialist Unity Centre of India, a left party in West Bengal, protesting against a number of issues including hike in power tariff in the state, affected normal life with police arresting 228 people so far.

Inspector General of Police, Chayan Mukherjee said 213 arrests were made in the districts so far. 15 arrests were made in the metropolis, city police said.

Express train derailed in India

PTI, Patna

A coach of the Kuil-Baidyanath Dham Express derailed near Simutala station in Bihar's Jamui district on Monday, railway sources said.

There were no casualties in the derailment, they said.

The incident occurred at 7.45 am when four wheels of the coach suddenly broke and derailed between Simutala and Ghorparan stations. The train was on way to Baidyanath Dham from Kuil, they said.

US to publish evidence of Iraqi arms soon

Baghdad hiding weapons: UK

REUTERS, Milan

The United States plans to make public soon its evidence that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction, Secretary of State Colin Powell was quoted as saying on Monday.

"The United States possesses several pieces of information which come from the work of our intelligence that show Iraq maintains prohibited weapons," Powell told Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera in an interview.

"Once we have made sure it can be done safely, I think that in the next week or soon after we can make public a good part of this material," he told the newspaper.

Corriere also quoted Powell as saying that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would be able to use the weapons soon.

On Sunday, Powell told European business and political leaders the United States was willing to attack Iraq alone if the UN Security Council shrank from disarming the country.

France, a veto-holder in the UN Security Council, has said it will only join an attack on Iraq if UN experts prove that Saddam has weapons of mass destruction and refuses to eliminate them.

Meanwhile, Britain said on Monday Iraq was hiding banned weapons, spying on UN arms inspectors and hindering their

movements, hours before a key inspectors' report to the Security Council.

British officials briefed journalists on intelligence they said provided their case, though they gave no indication as to the source of their information.

They made clear Britain is prepared to make the case that Iraq is in breach of Security Council resolutions calling on it to disarm, even if inspectors produce no "smoking gun" of clear evidence.

They said they had shared intelligence with the inspectors which showed Iraq was hiding chemical warfare munitions, missile engines and secret documents about weapons programs.



PHOTO: AFP

Derek Cianfrance takes a picture of the audience after his picture "Quattro Noza" won the Cinematography Award for a Dramatic film at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival awards ceremonies in Park City, Utah on Sunday.

Riots in Ivory Coast over peace deal

AP, Abidjan

Loyalist mobs, enraged by a French-brokered peace deal they say gives too much power to Ivory Coast rebels, attacked the French embassy and army base Sunday and beat foreigners. President Laurent Gbagbo urged his people to accept the agreement for ending the four-month insurgency.

"There are two ways to end a conflict. Either you win the war" or submit to negotiation and compromise, the Ivory Coast leader said in Paris, where two weeks of talks between his government and rebels led to the power-sharing peace deal which Gbagbo's own security forces called "humiliating."

"I did not win the war," he conceded.

As he spoke, smoke from fires set by angry government supporters rose over the high-rises of Abidjan, a sprawling commercial hub of 3 million people and Ivory Coast's main city.