



PHOTO: AFP

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (2nd R) jokes with Russian President Vladimir Putin (2nd L) after their joint press conference in Berlin on Sunday as their wives Lyudmila Putina (R) and Doris Schröder (L) accompany them. Putin said Russia is "almost completely in agreement" with proposals by France and Germany to disarm Iraq by peaceful means. Putin also said that the UN weapons inspectors should be given more time and greater means to carry out their work.

Sharon vows to oust Arafat

Israeli right kicks off coalition talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Sunday one of the main tasks of his new government would be removing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, as the revelation of new high-level contacts was met with a suicide attack on an Israeli army post in Gaza.

"The new government will face difficult tasks: the war against terrorism and against its leader, the head of the Palestinian Authority," said Sharon after President Moshe Katsav officially asked him to form a new coalition after last month's elections.

"The new government will have to finish off the battle against terrorism, remove its leadership and create conditions for the emergence of a new leadership with which it will be able to reach a real peace," he said.

Sharon's Likud party controls 40 out of 120 parliamentary seats following the January 28 polls he won on a promise to continue his headline policy against the 28-month Palestinian uprising.

However, his bureau head David Weisglass revealed this weekend Sharon had renewed contacts with senior Palestinian officials on new security arrangements.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat was quick to condemn the newly re-elected premier's remarks, which he said showed Sharon had no interest in peace.

"This means ... Sharon rejects the peace process and has chosen the path of continuing his aggression against the Palestinians," he told AFP.

The daily Yediot Aharonot said Sunday that Sharon and US President George W. Bush had agreed on a plan to get rid of Arafat after the United States had removed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"It was agreed that Israel could banish Yasser Arafat and his associates from the (occupied) territories if he refuses to appoint a prime minister endowed with the power to run the self-rule authority" set up in 1994, the daily said.

It quoted an unnamed senior Israeli official as saying: "We are going to throw him out, with a green light from the United States ... In the eyes of the White House, Arafat is no different to Saddam Hussein. The one's as repugnant as the other."

The official said the agreement between Bush and Sharon was made after a series of secret meetings which Sharon and Weisglass had held in recent weeks with vari-

ous senior Palestinian officials.

Weisglass was to meet Palestinian interior minister Hani al-Hassan on Monday to discuss a gradual ceasefire and potential Israeli withdrawal from areas reoccupied in the fighting, if the shattered Palestinian security forces could prevent more attacks on Israelis.

He held talks Sunday with Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Moasher in Amman.

Analysts said the move by Sharon was probably motivated by two main concerns.

The first was to reach an interim security arrangement to deflect anticipated US pressure to tackle the crisis after an attack on Baghdad, with the United States expected to push for a renewal of the collapsed peace process.

The second was thought to be a bid to put pressure on the Labour party to join a national unity coalition and present a broad, centrist response to the coming US pressure.

Otherwise Sharon could be forced to rely on small right-wing factions with their own headline agendas, and would probably be forced to call fresh elections before his mandate expires.

Blix sees no new evidence concerning Iraqi arms

Let UN inspections continue

REUTERS, Athens

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said on Monday he saw no new evidence concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in papers Baghdad gave him during a weekend visit there.

And he said Iraqi cooperation, not the number of weapons inspectors, was the key to answering the question of whether Iraq has weapons of mass destruction.

"This time they presented some papers to us in which they focused upon new issues. Not new evidence really as far as I can see, but they have nevertheless focused on real open issues and that is welcome," Blix told Reuters when he arrived in Athens after his visit to Baghdad.

Asked whether more weapons inspectors could do a better, faster job, he said: "The principal problem is not the number of inspectors but rather the active cooperation of the Iraqi side as we have said many times," Blix said.

Germany and France have floated a plan to avert war by beefing up UN inspectors in Iraq.

Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, were en route from Iraq after a two-day visit to Baghdad that left them encouraged there had been a possible change of heart by Iraq, which has been accused of failing to cooperate fully with them.

Blix said Iraq had promised to drill into the ground to prove it had

destroyed banned weapons, and also had suggested new methods of investigation for his weapon inspectors to better prove it does not have weapons of mass destruction.

"They themselves suggested new physical signs, new methods of investigating whether material they declared unilaterally destroyed, whether it was actually there. They will be drilling into the ground," Blix said on Monday.

The top weapons inspectors had held two days of talks with Iraqi officials ahead of their crucial report on Friday to the UN Security Council, which could shorten the countdown to a US-led attack on Baghdad.

German Defense Minister Peter Struck said on Sunday Berlin and Paris wanted UN troops to bolster inspections and would outline the plan when Blix and ElBaradei report to the Security Council on Friday.

AP adds: With more Iraqi documents in hand, and new ideas for tracking old weapons, the chief UN inspectors said they sense a "good beginning" and a changed "positive attitude" in Baghdad toward their job of ensuring Iraq is free of banned arms.

In their two days of talks here, however, Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei did not win immediate agreement, as expected, for U-2 reconnaissance flights over Iraq. In Washington, President Bush, in another heavy hint of imminent war, said again that Iraq's "game" is "over."

1 killed in Pak nuclear research site blast

REUTERS, Islamabad

One man was killed and another injured on Sunday in a blast at a liquid nitrogen plant which is part of a nuclear research facility at Nilore, 25 km from the Pakistani capital, the state-run news agency said.

The Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said the explosion occurred at the Pakistan Institute of Engineering and Applied Sciences, an educational wing of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission.

Officials have launched an investigation to determine the cause of the blast, the agency said. APP said no Pakistani nuclear facility had been affected.

Pakistan has two nuclear power plants, one in the southern port city of Karachi and one in Mianwali, southern Punjab.

11 drown as trawler capsizes in Kolkata

PTI, Kolkata

At least 11 people were drowned when a trawler capsized in the Haldi river after hitting a sandbank in West Bengal's East Midnapore district early on Monday.

Coast Guard divers recovered 11 bodies and rescued 51 people from the trawler, which was carrying about 70 people, when the mishap occurred near Haldia Port at 3:00 am, said Chayan Mukherjee, IGP (Law and Order).

The trawler, carrying a consignment of betel leaf, was sailing from Kachuberia in South 24-Parganas district for Nayachar in East Midnapore, the IGP said.

He said the operations were continuing to trace bodies and missing people.

Koreas to mark anti-Japanese uprising jointly

AFP, Seoul

Some 100 North Koreans will visit Seoul next month to take part in events to mark the 84th anniversary of a civilian uprising against Japanese colonial rule, organizers said Monday.

The North Koreans will make a three-day visit to Seoul from March 1 for the joint celebrations of the Independence Movement Day, the organizers said.

The agreement on the joint celebrations was reached during negotiations held in Beijing Saturday, they said.

The North's delegates, mostly religious leaders, are to take part in religious and other cultural events organized by South Koreans.

On March 1 in 1919, Koreans across the country staged non-violent demonstrations against Japanese colonial rule, which lasted from 1910 through 1945.

Following liberation from Japanese rule, the Korean peninsula was split between North and South, a division cemented by the 1950-53 Korean War.

Iran discovers uranium deposits

AFP, Tehran

President Mohammed Khatami announced Sunday that uranium deposits had been discovered in central Iran, and that his government was building two factories to convert the ore into fuel for its nuclear power stations.

Khatami was quoted by state IRNA news agency as telling officials from the science, research and technology ministry that the mine was located 200 kilometers (125 miles) from the central city of Yazd, and that the two factories were in Isfahan and Kashan.

The mine is already being exploited, IRNA said.

Khatami added that Iran had the technological know-how to convert the ore into nuclear fuel, but it was not known whether the two factories had been completed.

Bangkok braces for anti-war rally

THE NATION/ANN, Bangkok

The anti-war movement is gathering in Bangkok, with 2,000 expected to demonstrate in front of the US embassy on Saturday in what promised to be the biggest such event in recent years.

"This is part of a world anti-war. It might perhaps be the largest simultaneous demonstration and bigger than the anti-Vietnam War," said Ji Ungpakorn, lecturer of political science at Chulalongkorn University who is a member of the Worker Democracy Group which is one of the 50 Thai organisations and movements joining the protest in Bangkok. The coalition called itself the United for Peace Coalition, Thailand.

10 killed as truck crashes into tea stall in West Bengal

AFP, New Delhi

At least 10 people were killed and dozens injured early Wednesday when a truck rammed into a roadside tea stall in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

The truck overturned and smashed into the tea stall after the driver lost control of the vehicle, the report said.

Six of the dead were passengers in the truck, while the four others were customers of the tea stall.



A protester dressed as US President George Bush rides on fellow demonstrators symbolizing the UK and the UNO during a peace rally in New Delhi on Monday. The marchers were demonstrating against the threat of US-led war on Iraq.

PHOTO: AFP

'New al-Qaeda attack to coincide with Iraq war'

AFP, Washington

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation believes the al-Qaeda terror network is determined to carry out new attacks against the United States and its allies before or immediately after the beginning of an anticipated war with Iraq, Newsweek magazine reported.

"Our reporting strongly suggests that al-Qaeda has completed preparations for multiple attacks with spectaculars set for the United States and probably Saudi Arabia, and is delaying them until just before or just after a war begins with Iraq," the weekly quotes a classified FBI

bulletin in an issue due on newsstands on Monday.

"In that situation, al-Qaeda attacks will be described as an effort to defend Iraqi Muslims against the attack of the US-led crusaders," said the document cited in the report.

On Friday, US President George W. Bush approved raising the national terrorism alert status to "orange", or high.

The threat level was last raised in the United States in September, when the nation marked the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

Vajpayee slams Pak 'double standards' on terrorism

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee slammed Pakistan Monday for what he called "double standards" in dealing with terrorism, saying that selective condemnation of terror groups was counter-productive.

"Distinctions are sometimes drawn between different acts of terrorism," Vajpayee told delegates attending a two-day international conference on terrorism in the Indian capital.

"In some cases, we are told, it is not really terrorism but a freedom struggle. This is how our neighbour has been trying to justify its policy of cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir," he said.

Elaborating on his point, Vajpayee said: "Sometimes, double standards are used to justify terrorism."

"It is asserted that Osama bin Laden's associates are freedom fighters when they act in one country and terrorists when they act elsewhere. Jihadi (Islamic holy warriors) groups have been given shelter and support using this dubious logic," he said.

India accuses arch rival Pakistan of funding, arming and training Muslim rebels fighting to end Indian rule in Kashmir, where tens of thousands have died since 1989. Pakistan denies the charge and contends the Kashmir rebellion is indigenous.

Both India and Pakistan supported the US-led global war against terrorism, launched after the September 11 terror attacks on Washington and New York.

But New Delhi has often complained that Washington and its allies have not been sympathetic to India's problems with Islamic militants in Kashmir.

Vajpayee's remarks came as Indian and Pakistani diplomats left their respective missions in Islamabad and New Delhi following tit-for-tat expulsions by the two arch rivals over the weekend.

On Saturday, New Delhi expelled Jilil Abbas Jeelani -- who was Pakistan's acting high commissioner (ambassador) in New Delhi -- along with four other diplomats and staffers.

The expulsions followed accusations from New Delhi that Jeelani had funnelled cash to separatists in

Indian Kashmir.

In a retaliatory move, Pakistan ejected India's acting high commissioner Sudhir Vyas and four other diplomats.

In his speech, Vajpayee said that no group "irrespective of whether it claims to espouse the cause of the majority or the minority community, can be allowed to inflame passions, spread hatred and incite violence."

Stating that terrorists had chosen to "cover their campaign of killings with a cloak of 'jihad' (holy war)", Vajpayee said this benefited them in two ways.

"One, they seek some kind of popular legitimacy. Secondly, it helps them to recruit misguided youth and impart to them suicidal levels of motivation," he said.

In another dig at Islamabad, Vajpayee said a fact that was "often ignored (was) that the sponsorship, bases and finances for terrorism come from totalitarian military regimes."

"They nurture and support extremist terrorist groups to further their own political agenda.

Expelled top Indo-Pak diplomats drive home

REUTERS, New Delhi/ Islamabad

Top diplomats from India and Pakistan drove home on Monday across the subcontinent after tit-for-tat expulsions that further soured tense relations between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Pakistan's acting high commissioner, Jilil Abbas Jilani, and India's Sudhir Vyas headed in opposite directions along the Grand Trunk Road -- the scene of mass migrations when India and Pakistan were divided at independence in 1947.

The expulsions brought a fresh chill to the relationship between India and Pakistan, which came close to war last year over Indian accusations that Pakistan funds, arms and trains Kashmiri Muslim militants. Pakistan denies the charges.

Bodo rebels to sign peace deal with govt

AFP, Guwahati

A tribal militant group in India's troubled northeastern state of Assam is to sign a peace accord Monday with the federal government, officials said.

Rebel leaders of the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) are expected to sign the accord in the presence of India's Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi in New Delhi.

"The signing of the accord with the BLT could be the beginning of a new dawn in Assam's Bodo tribal dominated areas that have witnessed so much violence in the past decades," the chief minister told AFP by telephone from New Delhi.

"We hope other militant groups will also come forward for peace talks with the government."

The BLT entered into a ceasefire agreement with the federal govern-

ment in March 2000 and the two sides have since held 17 rounds of peace talks aimed at ending nearly two decades of violent insurgency in Assam.

Unlike other rebel groups operating in Assam, the BLT is not fighting for secession but a homeland for the ethnic Bodo tribe within the Indian union.

The BLT was formed in 1996 and their cadres were known for their expertise on explosives -- having blown up several trains, including killing 33 railway passengers in a powerful blast in 1999 in western Assam.

The signing of the accord could pave the way for creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) which would give more executive and legislative powers to the tribal Bodos who make up an estimated 1.6 million people out of Assam's total population of 26 million.



PHOTO: AFP

Expelled Indian diplomats leave from the residence of the acting High Commissioner to Pakistan Sudhir Vyas in Islamabad for New Delhi on Monday. Vyas and four colleagues, expelled at the weekend in a tit-for-tat move after New Delhi threw out Pakistan's top diplomat, began their journey home by road. They were expected to cross at the hostile neighbours' main border crossing at Wagah, 285 km south-east of the capital and 20 km from the eastern city of Lahore, at around 2:30 pm.