

Heavy snowstorm brings US capital to standstill

AFP, Washington

New York and Boston braced for the arrival of the same monster snowstorm that shut down airports and stilled traffic in Washington, Philadelphia and other cities in the eastern United States.

The National Weather Service expected the storm to bury parts of the New York area under two feet (60 centimeters) of snow before moving on early Tuesday.

The snowfall — one of the heaviest ever recorded in many cities — began before dawn Sunday, triggering a state of emergency in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the US capital.

Flights were halted at Washington's Reagan airport and Baltimore-Washington airport Sunday morning and operations were sharply curtailed at Dulles airport outside the capital.

At Philadelphia airport, just one flight in four took off and many of those were seriously delayed.

Many stranded air passengers resorted to trains, which are equipped with snow plows, and the national railway service Amtrak said it would run a service throughout the night.

The storm wreaked havoc on Washington's subway system. By Sunday afternoon, trains which normally arrive every few minutes were running only once every two hours.

The snow was part of a mammoth weather system which in the space of a few days set off winter storms in southern Illinois, flood

watches in Alabama and ice storm warnings in northern Kentucky.

Police in Washington warned residents to forego all non-essential trips. Drivers who failed to heed the warnings in many instances slid into ditches or were forced to abandon their vehicles in snowdrifts.

In downtown Washington, restaurants, coffee shops and bookstores were shuttered and for the first time in seven years, Washington's Smithsonian museums, the National Zoo, national monuments and memorials were closed.

President George W. Bush cut short his weekend visit to the presidential retreat at Camp David Sunday, in an attempt to beat the snow back to the White House.

But his 14-car motorcade got bogged down and was stuck behind plows, turning what was normally a 90-minute drive into a two and a half hour ordeal.

Road crews could not keep even major thoroughfares clear of the snow, which fell at nearly one inch (two centimeters) an hour.

"The plows are having a hard time keeping up," said Kenneth O'Dell, communications supervisor for Montgomery County, Maryland, just outside the US capital. "Half an hour, 45 minutes, (the streets) are just covered over again."

Monday, Presidents' Day, is a holiday. But Washington city officials doubted the snow would be cleaned up in time for the start of the working week.



PHOTO: AFP

People try to push their cars stuck in the middle of the road in Rosslyn, Virginia as snow continues to fall in the capital region ON Sunday. A massive storm dumped several inches of snow between the US Midwest and the East Coast, bringing activity in the US capital Washington, Philadelphia and several other east coast cities grinding to a halt.

NATO's breakthrough to end Iraq crisis

AFP, Brussels

NATO emerged from one of its gravest crises yesterday after hammering out a face-saving accord to boost Turkey's defences to prepare for a possible Iraq war, ending a week-long trans-Atlantic standoff in a deal which bypassed key holdout France.

NATO chief George Robertson hailed the accord, struck late Sunday by 18 of the alliance's 19 members after one of the worst crises in its history, saying it showed NATO "will stand by an ally if that ally is under threat."

"Alliance solidarity has prevailed," he told reporters. "NATO nations have assumed their collective responsibility towards Turkey, a nation at the moment under threat," he added.

"We agree on substance, we agree on timing, and we agree on how to integrate our collective solidarity with Turkey," he added.

But highlighting the strains in the alliance, the three countries which had blocked accord, immediately issued a joint statement underlining that the NATO decision should not "prejudge" diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis.

"The decision by NATO does not in any way prejudice the ongoing efforts by Belgium, France and Germany to continue to work within the framework of UNSCR 1441," they said.

Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt separately welcomed

the accord, which his country had stubbornly opposed before finally lifting its objections.

"We are happy that we managed to convince our allies of the justness of our demands," the Belga news agency quoted him as saying.

Verhofstadt expressed the hope that the resolution of the standoff would encourage the leaders of the European Union, meeting here on Monday, to draw up a common position on Iraq.

"If there is still a chance of avoiding war in the coming weeks, it was this Sunday at NATO, and it will be with a unanimous decision this Monday at the Brussels summit," the Belgian premier declared.

The crisis was finally resolved after Robertson convened the 18-member Defence Planning Committee (DPC), on which France does not sit. Paris withdrew from NATO's integrated military command in 1966.

US ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns immediately welcomed the accord, calling it "a very big step forward."

"The United States is delighted that core allies ... agreed today to extend military support for Turkey," he told reporters shortly after the deal was confirmed by Robertson.

But other diplomats did little to conceal their exasperation at France. "They were an obstacle. When they were out of the room we reached a decision in one day," said one senior official.

"France is isolated from the mainstream of NATO on this question," he added.

The US proposals, made in January but scaled back during talks, now involve providing Patriot missile systems, AWACS surveillance planes and biological and chemical protection units to Turkey, a NATO ally bordering Iraq.

France, Belgium and Germany had blocked the US proposals, arguing that NATO should not send a wrong signal while diplomacy continues.

Robertson downplayed the fact that France did not back the decision, saying Paris "can answer for itself."

"We would have preferred to have a decision by the North Atlantic Council with all 19 members present," he said, referring to NATO's policy-making body.

"France is by its own choice not a member of the integrated military structure ... we reached consensus today, I think that's a good thing. France has got its own position and I think it can answer for itself," he said.

"This is not a step towards going to war," he added.

France, Belgium and Germany meanwhile underlined their wish for diplomacy to continue to be the priority, saying in their joint statement that war could only ever be a "last resort."

40 arrested from anti-war demo in San Francisco

AFP, San Francisco

As many as 100,000 demonstrators marched through downtown San Francisco Sunday, protesting a possible US-led war on Iraq, echoing protests held around the world one day earlier.

The protest was mostly peaceful, but a group of several hundred self-described anarchists, many dressed in black and with faces masked by kerchiefs, broke away from the march to block traffic and prevent San Francisco's famous cable car from operating in the downtown tourist district.

After spray-painting anti-war slogans and breaking windows, some 40 were arrested after scuffling with police, the San Francisco police department said.

Protestors expressed a mix of anger and fear over the possibility of war, and said they by seeing millions turn out around the world.

The crowd was stronger than the 150,000 to 200,000-strong anti-war protest last January, possibly because many who took part in that demonstration marched in Los Angeles and other cities on Saturday.

Organisers held the San Francisco march on Sunday instead of Saturday to avoid conflicting with the city's annual Chinese New Year parade.

A number of marchers bore banners reading Vive La France, saying they were cheered by Paris' resistance to US pressure to support the war.

Top Hamas leader dies of wounds

AFP, Jerusalem

A Top leader of the radical Islamic group Hamas died of his wounds in an Israeli hospital Monday hours after being fatally shot in an undercover raid in the Gaza Strip, Israeli public radio said.

The radio said Hamas chief Riyad Abu Zaid died of his wounds in Beersheba hospital in the south. Hospital officials confirmed that a Palestinian admitted with critical gunshot wounds had died, but refused to disclose his identity.

Israeli troops captured Mr Zaid and raided a stronghold of the Islamic militant group in Gaza City, killing two Palestinians and blowing up the house of a suspected bomber.

The Israeli strike came in retaliation for a deadly Hamas attack on an Israeli tank over the weekend. Israel said it will intensify its hunt for Hamas militants, and the Israeli daily Haaretz said troops were poised for a major strike in Gaza, but would stop short of reoccupying the strip of more than 1 million Palestinians.

Kalam asks leaders to go by court verdict on Ayodhya

PTI, New Delhi

With Ayodhya expected to occupy centrestage in the Budget Session of Parliament, President APJ Abdul Kalam yesterday asked political parties and religious leaders to accept court verdict on the issue.

"While the judiciary should expedite its work and give an early verdict, it is also necessary for political parties, religious leaders and eminent social personalities to promote an atmosphere of mutual understanding, goodwill and accommodation," Kalam said in his first address to the joint sitting of Parliament on the opening day of the budget session.

The Government had repeatedly made it clear that the Ayodhya dispute could be resolved either through negotiations between the two communities or through a verdict of the judiciary which had to be accepted by all concerned, the President said in his address.

Noting that the national security was a matter of highest priority for his Government, Kalam said "after the December 13 attack on our Parliament by Pakistan-based terrorists, we were constrained to deploy our troops along the international border."

"This decision achieved its purpose by showing "both our firmness and our self-restraint in dealing with our hostile neighbour," he said, adding in October last year, the Government, after careful deliberation, decided to strategically redeploy the Armed Forces from their positions.

This, he asserted, was done without compromising on their capacity to respond decisively to any emergency and without lowering their vigil in Jammu and Kashmir.

Meanwhile Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Sunday discussed the Ayodhya issue with Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N

Chandrababu Naidu, whose party TDP extends crucial outside support to the BJP-led NDA government, in the backdrop of the Centre's moving the Supreme Court on the subject.

Naidu, who specially came here at the invitation of Vajpayee, told reporters after the two-hour meeting at the Prime Minister's residence here, a day ahead of the start of the budget session of Parliament.

Skirting a direct answer on government's decision to move the apex court seeking vacation of its stay on religious activities in the undisputed land in Ayodhya, Naidu said he explained the temple issue at a meeting of TDP parliamentary party meeting held here after his discussions with Vajpayee.

Naidu said since political parties and religious leaders have failed to get consensus on the issue, only the Supreme Court has to decide. "Whatever the judgement, all political parties have to abide by it", he said.

Papadopoulos faces big challenges

AFP, Nicosia

New Cyprus President Tassos Papadopoulos faces the twin challenges of leading the Greek Cypriots to a UN reunification deal for Cyprus by a target date of February 28 and toward EU entry in 2004.

The 69-year-old London-trained lawyer, elected outright in Sunday's vote to head the internationally-recognised Cyprus republic, was favourite to oust incumbent President Glafcos Clerides, 83, even though he is viewed as a less skilled negotiator than the elder statesman.

Although now confronted with a baptism of fire, Papadopoulos is no political lightweight, having spent 45 years in Cypriot politics after becoming the island's youngest ever minister at the age of 24.

As leader of the centre-right Diko party, Papadopoulos also had the backing in Sunday's election of the main opposition in parliament, the communist Akel party, as well as a host of other groups.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents of the area examines a bullet-ridden car after unidentified gunmen sprayed bullet and killed one of a leader of an ethnic-based Muttahhida Qaumi Movement Khalid bin Walid in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi on Sunday. Unidentified gunmen shot dead Khalid bin Walid while he was driving in his car. Tension has been simmering between his party and a break-away faction known as MQM-Haqiqi, whose offices were closed in some areas after the mainstream party joined the coalition government following parliamentary elections in October last year.

War may be necessary, but not now: Solana

REUTERS, Brussels

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana said yesterday that he expected EU leaders to agree that war may be necessary against Iraq but only after all peaceful options are exhausted.

Speaking before the 15 leaders were due to hold an emergency summit on the crisis, he sought to bridge the widely divergent positions between pro-American nations led by Britain and Spain, and states led by France and Germany that oppose a rush to war.

"Everybody recognizes war is the last resort," Solana told reporters. "I think everybody agrees war may be necessary at a given moment, but we are not at this point. We have to exhaust all the elements of diplomacy and all the elements of keeping (U.N. weapons) inspectors working."

Solana, whose role as the EU's foreign policy spokesman has been

largely neutered by the absence of a consensus on the crisis, said the arms inspectors should be given the resources they need to verify Iraq's disarmament of suspected weapons of mass destruction.

"They may need time, they may need intelligence, they may need means. It is for the EU to try to help the inspectors, in particular the chief inspectors, to obtain what they need," he said.

Solana said he expected a consensus around three points at the EU summit: "We know very well that Saddam has to be disarmed. Everybody agrees the center of gravity to deal with the crisis should be the U.N."

Arranged at less than a week's notice by current European Union president Greece, the meeting has turned into not just a debate about Iraq but a defining test of whether Europe can speak with one voice when it counts.

N Korea determined to win nuke standoff with US

AP, Seoul

North Korea defiantly declared yesterday that it would triumph in its nuclear standoff with the United States, and South Korea's president warned that Pyongyang's weapons programme could start an atomic arms race in Northeast Asia.

The North's state-run Central Radio said the world was watching the Pyongyang-Washington standoff "with sweating hands," and vowed that the Stalinist state would maintain its "mighty army-first policy."

"The victory in the nuclear conflict is ours, and the red flag of the army-first policy will flutter ever more vigorously," said the broadcast, monitored by South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

Washington and its allies are pressuring North Korea to abandon its suspected nuclear weapon

programmes. The North has insisted on direct talks first with the United States, from which it wants a nonaggression treaty.

The bluster from the North came as South Korea's outgoing president warned that Pyongyang's production of atomic weapons could force his country and Japan to build nuclear bombs as well.

"If North Korea has nuclear weapons, South Korea could possess such weapons ... and Japan could arm with nuclear weapons. This is what a lot of people worry about. This cannot be tolerated," Kim Dae-jung told tourism officials.

Kim, whose term ends Feb. 25, did not clarify whether he thought North Korea already has such a weapon. Prime Minister Kim Suk-soo has said he believed Pyongyang does not have nuclear weapons.

Secretary of Defence Donald

Rumsfeld has said that North Korea has one or two nuclear weapons and could extract enough plutonium within months to make six to eight more.

North Korea had never admitted or denied having nuclear weapons, but has said it has the right to develop nuclear weapons.

Pyongyang's declaration of ultimate victory in the nuclear standoff came a day after it hosted national celebrations for reclusive leader Kim Jong Il's 61st birthday on Sunday.

In his comments to tourism officials, Kim Dae-jung - who has championed a policy of engagement with North Korea - said he believes there is "no possibility" of US military action against Pyongyang, and called for talks.

"North Korea-US talks are important because the problem can only be solved there," he said.

India, Pak agree to grant visas to new mission heads

PTI, Islamabad

Nearly a week after India and Pakistan expelled each other's top diplomats, they have agreed in principle to grant visas to new Deputy High Commissioners appointed by them.

It has been agreed that assignment visas of senior Indian diplomat TCA Raghavan and Pakistan's Munawar Saeed Bhatti would be cleared on Tuesday, Vikram Misri, acting charge d' affaires of the Indian High Commission here, said.

He said that Raghavan and Bhatti would simultaneously be granted visas after which they would decide about dates to take over their respective assignments. Both have been designated as Deputy High Commissioners until the appointment of High Commissioners, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi fine arts student Mohamad Abbas works on a bronze statue of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein at Baghdad's fine Art school. French President Jacques Chirac has said in an interview with Time magazine that Saddam Hussein would do the world and his country "the biggest favour" by leaving power.

Torrential rains kill ten in Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

Torrential rains in southern Pakistan on Monday killed at least 10 people including a 10-year-old child, witnesses and social workers said.

A woman and the child were among six people who perished when early morning rains pounded Gadap, a village about 45 kilometers (28 miles) southeast of the coastal commercial capital Karachi, and caused houses to collapse.

"The houses caved in due to continuous rains. Some of the bodies perished under the debris," said an AFP photographer at the scene.

A mud-brick home in Hyderabad, about 170 kilometers (105 miles) east of Karachi, also collapsed. According to the Edhi Welfare Trust, a volunteer aid organisation, at least three members of a family died.