

S Korea wants talks soon to resolve nuclear crisis

AFP, Seoul

South Korea called Tuesday for talks with North Korea "as soon as possible" to resolve the nuclear crisis as President Roh Moo-Hyun set himself the goal of averting the collapse of the bankrupt Stalinist state.

A senior South Korean official said Seoul was unwilling to speculate on how long it would take before talks materialized following North Korea's announcement last week that it was prepared to take part in multilateral negotiations.

"Our position is that the most important thing is to hold the talks as soon as possible," said Shim Yoon-Joe, director general of the North American bureau at the Foreign Ministry here. "I am not in a position to comment about when talks would take place."

Earlier, another foreign ministry official said discussions on the format for talks were underway, but cautioned that it was premature to discuss timing and who would take part.

"At this point, those kind of details are out of context. We are just starting to discuss how to develop North Korea's cooperation to ease the path to talks," he said.

Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun said Monday South Korea was in contact with the United States and China to discuss the format for the talks.

He said Seoul was advocating a so-called "four plus two" format involving North Korea and South Korea plus China, Russia, Japan and the United States.

Reports that China and North Korea wanted to exclude Russia and

Japan from the talks were unconfirmed here.

"We can't rule that out entirely but it does seem implausible at this stage," said a foreign ministry spokesman.

Roh Moo-Hyun, in an interview with Munhwa Ilbo, a Seoul daily, published Tuesday said South Korea was a key player in the standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons drive and its goal was to encourage the Stalinist state to "avoid its collapse and change its course through cooperation."

He said that his offer of a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il was off the table for the moment.

"Actually it is not the proper time to hold a summit between North and South Korea which I think cannot solve North Korea's nuclear problem

right now," he was quoted as saying.

"At this moment it is more important to create a favourable atmosphere for dialogue between North Korea and the United States."

For months North Korea has rejected multilateral talks but on Saturday it signalled through a foreign ministry spokesman it would accept any form of dialogue with Washington if the latter dropped its hostile policy toward the communist state.

North Korea's move was welcomed worldwide and sparked hope for an early end to the crisis that began in October when North Korea reportedly admitted that it was running a secret uranium-enrichment program, in violation of a 1994 nuclear deal between the two countries.



South Korean soldiers work on the connecting road between the two Koreas in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) near Paju on Tuesday. South Korea wants North Korea to begin talks "as soon as possible" to resolve the nuclear crisis but is unwilling to speculate on how soon that would be, a senior official said.

US steps into Lanka peace process

AFP, Washington

The United States Monday took its biggest step yet into the Sri Lankan peace drive, but its decision to bar Tamil Tiger rebels from a major donor seminar injected new tensions into a vicious separatist conflict.

The rebels were furious, threatening to boycott a bigger international donor conference for Sri Lanka in Tokyo in June, accusing the United States of insincerity towards the group's fragile ceasefire with the Colombo government.

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, hosting the talks including a senior Sri Lankan minister, envoys of 30 nations plus world aid and financial institutions, held out hope however that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could soon enter the fold.

"There is one partner for peace that is today conspicuous in its absence," Armitage told the seminar, which was designed to drum up support for the Tokyotalks.



A Pakistani soldier inspects a school in Chakothi on April 12, 1.5 km from the Line of Control (LoC) dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan, damaged by years of shelling. Some 20,000 villagers in Chakothi live within three kilometers of the heavily militarised LoC, despite frequent artillery duels, which have claimed 768 lives on the Pakistani side since 1999.

Indo-Pak Line of Control still volatile

AFP, Line Of Control

No fences, no signs mark this 767-kilometer (475 mile) line. But almost a year after India and Pakistan teetered on the brink of their third war over Kashmir, it remains a potential flashpoint for the world's first nuclear conflict.

The Line of Control (LoC) runs invisibly between hills, slashes rivers and dense forest and climbs higher than 6,000 meters (yards), splitting the Himalayan state between the nuclear neighbours, separating families and provoking decades of bloodshed that has cost tens of thousands of lives.

"Kashmir is still volatile. The situation across the LoC remains as tense as ever," said Lieutenant Colonel Imran Ahmed, the military officer in charge of the Chakothi sector on the Pakistani side.

"More than ever under the prevailing environment, there is an important need for the world community to pay attention."

As Indian leaders fire statements claiming Pakistan is a fit target for pre-emptive strikes, shelling across the LoC has escalated in recent weeks, according to Pakistani and United Nations observers.

In the past week alone, six villagers on the Pakistani side have been killed by shelling, bringing this year's toll to 16.

More than 700,000 troops are still deployed on both sides, despite the withdrawal of forces from the international border seven months ago.

"Across the LoC there's been a very small reduction in forces. They have not moved back to peacetime locations," Ahmed said.

Pakistan's military says around 8,700 Indian artillery and mortar shells have landed on its side this year.

Last year almost 60,000 Indian rounds were fired into Pakistani territory, killing 96 villagers, it said. Since 1999, as many as 768 villagers on this side have been killed in the crossfire.

"The Indians deliberately fire on civilians. Normally they fire during Friday prayers," Ahmed claimed.

In Chakothi, some 20,000 people live within three kilometers of the LoC on the Pakistani side, some as close as 500 meters.

Chakothi's shattered bazaar is two kilometers (1.2 miles) from the first Indian bunker. Its stalls are battered from repeated shelling, but they keep opening. The school has been shelled into disuse. Now it just houses a bunker.

At the core of tensions are Indian claims that Islamic rebels fighting Indian rule are flowing over the LoC from Pakistan, despite President Pervez

Musharraf's commitment last May to stop the flow.

Since the insurgency began in 1989 almost 90,000 Kashmiris have been killed by Indian forces, according to Pakistan. India says around 37,500 people have died.

No one on the Pakistani side denies that people are still slipping over, but they blame India.

"Pakistan has one-twentieth the troops that India has in Kashmir," said one military officer, estimating 35,000 troops on the Pakistani side and 700,000 on the Indian side.

"If India's professional army can't stop them then how can we?"

Stopping infiltration 100 percent "is not possible," said human rights activist Farooq A. Niaz. "But it's not like what it used to be. There could be desultory attempts, but by and large the crossing has reduced."

The president of Pakistani Kashmir, Sardar Anwar Khan, said there was no "official" crossing, "but people have been going and coming."

"I cannot say that nobody is going over," Khan, a retired major general, told AFP.

Moreover, Musharraf was powerless to stop it, he said.

"This is not General Musharraf's territory, this is Kashmir. There is no border here. The LoC is the LoC."

Two Palestinian gunmen, Israeli officer killed

REUTERS, Nablus

Israeli soldiers killed a Palestinian gunman and took two other militants into custody on Tuesday in a West Bank operation in which an Israeli officer was shot dead, the Israeli army said.

In the southern town of Rafah in the Gaza Strip, a militant from the Islamic Jihad group was killed by rockets fired from an Israeli army watchtower, witnesses said. Islamic Jihad said Abdel-Hamid Abu el-Eish was one of its field commanders in a 30-month-old Palestinian uprising for statehood.

Commenting on the West Bank raid, the army said that troops had surrounded an apartment building in the city of Nablus and called on three wanted men from the militant Islamic group Hamas who were holed up inside to surrender.

Two turned themselves in but the third man opened fire, killing an Israeli lieutenant and wounding another soldier, the army said.

Soldiers shot the gunman dead. Palestinian ambulance workers later recovered his body from the roof of the five-story building.

In the West Bank city of Hebron, the army demolished the home of a Hamas militant. An army statement said he had tried to carry out an attack in the nearby Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba on April 5.

At least 1,992 Palestinians and 730 Israelis have been killed since the uprising began in September 2000.

Greater Europe takes shape

AFP, Athens

Leaders of the future, enlarged European Union gather on Wednesday in Athens to sign the treaty bringing 10 new members from Southern and Eastern Europe into the EU fold -- protected by a police mobilisation that is unprecedented for Greece.

120 officials, including a host of heads of state and government from across Europe joined by Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, will attend the signing ceremony in the Attalos Stoa, the rebuilding of a 2BC colonnade in the archaeological district of Athens.

More than 10,000 policemen will be deployed across the Greek capital to protect the foreign dignitaries, twice as many as during the visit of the pope to Athens two years ago.

Access to the city centre will be tightly controlled in anticipation of massive anti-war demonstrations. The prime ministers of Britain Tony Blair, Spain Jose Maria Aznar and Italy Silvio Berlusconi -- all firm backers of the war in Iraq -- are expected to be the rallies' main targets. Anti-globalisation and leftist groups have said they were "undesirables".

1 killed in New Orleans school shooting

REUTERS, New Orleans

A gunman armed with an AK-47 assault rifle opened fire on a student in a packed school gymnasium on Monday, killing one boy and injuring three girls in an apparent retaliation shooting, New Orleans police said.

Police spokesman Marlon Defillo said officers arrested four male suspects, ranging in age from 15 to 19, in the attack. Charges are pending, he said.

Witnesses told police that the gunman, accompanied by three accomplices, confronted Jonathan Williams, 15, as he sat on the benches in the gymnasium of John McDonogh High School at about 10 a.m. The gym was filled with more than 200 students.

The gunman fired repeatedly at Williams, hitting him in the head and body and killing him instantly. Three female students, two aged 16 and one 15, were wounded as they tried to get away from the shooting, police said.

The attacker and the others then raced out of the school and fled in a red Oldsmobile.

Police declined to identify the female victims. Defillo said the 15-year-old was in serious condition at a New Orleans hospital, while the other two were in good condition.

Secrecy, fears surround SARS outbreak in Asia

AFP, Hong Kong

Stubborn secrecy and new fears surrounded the SARS outbreak in Asia Tuesday as China denied international experts access to military hospitals and the virus killed younger and fitter people in Hong Kong.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said it had been refused access to Beijing military hospitals where unconfirmed reports have said a large number of patients with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) are being treated.

"While Beijing authorities appear to have contained transmission in some hospitals, they have not yet granted WHO experts permission to visit military hospitals, which have been the focus of numerous rumours," the WHO said on its website.

A WHO team of experts began meeting with Chinese officials again Tuesday as part of a week-long effort to understand how health officials

were coping with the epidemic, WHO information officer Jim Radamaekers told AFP.

China's health ministry told the WHO Tuesday that 14 new SARS cases had been recorded, bringing the total to 1,438, with 64 deaths.

China has been strongly criticised for failing to reveal earlier the full picture behind the SARS outbreak which first emerged in the southern province of Guangdong in November and then spread across the border to Hong Kong.

The virus, for which there is no cure yet, has since been spread around the world by airline passengers, infecting more than 3,000 people in over 30 countries. The global death toll now stands at 143.

In Hong Kong, which has listed a total of nearly 1,200 cases and 48 fatalities, a sudden cluster of deaths of younger and healthier victims heightened fears that SARS is no longer just a killer of the elderly or chronically ill.

A 42-year-old man with no previous history of poor health was among seven who died Monday in Hong Kong's highest single-day death toll, medical officials said. His death followed the weekend deaths of five people who also had been in good health before contracting SARS.

"We're worried about these people who are young," Dr. Henry Yeung of the Hong Kong Doctors Union (HKDU) told AFP.

While Hong Kong Hospital Authority officials say doctors have had some unprecedented successes with new drug therapies, acting authority chief Dr. Ko Wing-man warned that the young can also succumb to the virus.

"I do not want to send the message that younger patients definitely will all recover," Ko said Monday.

The WHO said it would examine the deaths of younger SARS patients, but added that there was no evidence that the virus had become more dangerous.

Sudan likely to escape US sanctions

AFP, Washington

Sudan is unlikely to be hit with new US sanctions when a six-month review of its cooperation with regional peace efforts is presented to lawmakers next week, a senior State Department official said Monday.

"I would not expect that," the official said when asked whether US President George W. Bush would exercise his authority to impose sanctions provided under the Sudan Peace Act which he signed in October.

The legislation allows Bush to levy the sanctions if he finds Khartoum is not negotiating in good faith with southern rebels to end a bloody 19-year civil war.

The first six-month review of Sudan's compliance with the law is due on Monday and the State Department official said the peace process had thus far made substantial progress.



Israeli soldiers arrest two unidentified Palestinian men during an army operation in the West Bank city of Nablus on Tuesday. A Palestinian activist from the hardline group Hamas was killed in the morning by Israeli soldiers who attacked the northern West Bank house where he was hiding out, Israeli military sources said.