

North, South Koreas to hold nuke talks

AP, Seoul

South Korea announced plans Monday to hold high-level talks with North Korea next week after President Bush gave diplomatic pressure a "good chance" of succeeding in persuading the communist nation to give up its nuclear ambitions.

In a telephone message, South Korean Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun accepted the North Korean offer to hold negotiations April 27-29, his office said.

The announcement came days before the United States, North Korea and China were expected to meet in separate talks in Beijing to discuss the North's suspected nuclear weapons programs. Those talks could take place as early as this week.

Along with the United States, regional neighbors China, Japan and South Korea oppose a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Bush cited that unanimity of purpose - if not of strategy - as reason for optimism.

"I believe that all four of us working together have a good chance of convincing North Korea to abandon her ambitions to develop nuclear arsenals," Bush told reporters in Fort Hood, Texas.

North Korea has accused the United States of planning to invade, and said the US-led war against Iraq was proof that it needed a strong military deterrent.

"If enemies invade our inviolable sky, land and seas even an inch, destroy up the aggressors with merciless annihilating blows," read one slogan carried by its newspapers, KCNA, the country's news agency, said in an English-language report. North Korea routinely issues such belligerent rhetoric.

Washington says it does not plan to invade, and has said for months that a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue was possible. However, it has not ruled out a military option.

Beijing residents hunker down for SARS siege

Mayor of capital city fired

REUTERS, Beijing

Qi Xieli says she ventures outside her Beijing flat for just two reasons: to see her boyfriend and to raid the super-market once a week for enough food to keep her safely barricaded at home.

The unemployed 24-year-old has put off seeking a job for fear she may contract the SARS virus that has killed 18 people in China's capital, infected at least 339 and cost two senior political leaders their careers.

"I don't dare go out these days," Qi told Reuters, white cotton face mask in hand as she waited for her boyfriend outside a busy office complex.

"I'm looking for a job, but I won't start until the SARS problem has died down," she said. "It's too scary."

Qi said her reaction to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which emerged last November in southern China, was the only logical thing to do because doctors had no cure.

On the streets of Beijing, people avoided shops and restaurants but thronged pharmacies stocked with herbal potions, antibacterial medicines, face masks and industrial strength cleaning solutions in hopes of dodging the disease.

Chinese leaders, accused of covering up cases and reacting too slowly to SARS, canceled the week-long May Day holiday to discourage travelers from spreading SARS to far-flung areas.

Wang Haibo, a boisterous 27-year-old accountant carrying a shopping bag full of bottles of disinfectant for her

office, said the decision was too little, too late.

AP adds: Beijing's mayor has been fired, state-run newspapers reported on Monday, a day after he and the health minister were removed from key Communist Party posts amid questions over the government's handling of the SARS outbreak.

Meng Xuenong was dismissed as part of a "reshuffling of major officials in the city government," the Beijing Morning News reported.

The decisions came at a meeting where the Communist Party's top personnel official criticized the city's handling of SARS, saying Beijing's slow response had allowed the number of cases to grow and the disease to spread in a larger area, the paper said.



PHOTO: AFP

A family prepares for a day on the beach at Repulse Bay in Hong Kong wearing masks to protect against a killer pneumonia on Monday. The disease known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has now killed 88 people in the territory since it erupted in February with 1,380 people infected.



PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan girl holds her younger sister at a refugee camp in Karachi on Monday before their departure to their homeland. About 600 refugees including women and children were repatriated to Afghanistan under an agreement drafted by the UNHCR. According to UNHCR officials more than 16,000 refugees living across Pakistan have been shifted to Afghanistan this year.

Afghan refugees head back to their homes

AFP, Islamabad

About 1,100 Afghan refugees headed back to their war-shattered homeland from Pakistan Monday, the latest of some 1.5 million to be voluntarily repatriated from Afghanistan's eastern neighbour.

Some 200 men, women and children were farewelled by Frontier Regions Minister Aftab Ahmad Sherpao from mud houses they had been living in on Islamabad's outskirts, while 900 refugees began the journey home from Karachi on Pakistan's south coast.

Most were returning to Kabul, the Afghan capital, and eastern Nangarhar province, said an official from the United Nations refugee agency, which is assisting the repatriation program.

Among them were more than 100 children who have never seen their country.

Another two million Afghan refugees remain across Pakistan, which has harboured Afghans fleeing conflict and crippling drought for more than

20 years.

"I came here with my family after the Taliban came into power," Mohammad Saleem, 28, told AFP as he prepared to leave Karachi, referring to the headline Islamic militia that seized power in 1996.

"If (Afghan President Hamid Karzai) can bring peace and I can live there without terror, what else could anyone want?"

Monday's returns are the biggest since Afghanistan, Pakistan and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) inked a tri-partite agreement on March 17 to repatriate 600,000 refugees annually over the next three years.

The refugee departures coincide with Pakistan's announcement that it has released 50 Afghan prisoners held for petty crimes. They are also being repatriated.

The release is "a gesture of goodwill" ahead of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Pakistan on Tuesday, the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Landslide kills 34 in Kyrgyzstan

REUTERS, Bishkek

A landslide swept through a village in southern Kyrgyzstan on Sunday, killing 34 people and burying 11 homes, an emergencies ministry official said on Monday.

"Four men, 13 women and 17 children were killed, and the landslide fully covered 11 houses," the official told Reuters.

The landslide rocked the village of Kurbu-Tash on Sunday afternoon, the official said. Bulldozers and rescue workers scoured the disaster site in the mountainous Osh region, some 300 km south of the capital, Bishkek, and had recovered four corpses. Villagers were evacuated after the landslide, the Interfax news agency said.

Officials said the disaster may have been triggered by heavy rainfall weakening nearby slopes. The ministry added that the region's governor and the country's first deputy prime minister Kurmanbek Osmonov had gone to the site to lead an investigation.

The ministry said the landslide also destroyed a power line in some places. Interfax earlier reported that electricity and telephone communications were down.

US envoy supports India in fight against terror

AFP, New Delhi

United States ambassador to India Robert Blackwill said Monday militancy against India had to end if the international war on terrorism was to be won.

Blackwill made the comments in a statement announcing that he was returning to his academic career at Harvard University, where he taught foreign and defence policy.

"The fight against international terrorism will not be won until terrorism against India ends permanently," Blackwill said.

"There can be no other legitimate stance by the United States, no American compromise whatever on this elemental geopolitical and moral truth," the ambassador said.

India heavily depends on Washington to exert pressure on its arch-rival Pakistan -- a key American ally in the war against terror -- whom it accuses of abetting insurgency in the disputed Kashmir region.

New Delhi particularly accuses its

nuclear-armed neighbour of sending Islamic guerillas into its zone of Kashmir, which is divided between the two countries and claimed in full by both.

"We have overlapping vital national interests in promoting peace and freedom in Asia, slowing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and combating international terrorism," Blackwill said.

The diplomat said international peace, prosperity and freedom would be further advanced if the relationship between the US and India was fundamentally transformed.

The outspoken Blackwill was nominated for the Indian mission in June 2001.

PTI adds: Terming as a "daring step" and born out of genuine desire for peace Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's offer of dialogue, former Pakistan occupied Kashmir premier Sardar Qayyum Khan has said only peace process could stop militancy in Jammu and Kashmir.

Obasanjo takes lead in Nigeria election

AP, Lagos

President Olusegun Obasanjo took a commanding lead in early returns from voting that could bring Nigeria its first transition from one civilian government to another, but an opposition leader charged widespread fraud and threatened mass protests.

With more than 14 million votes counted Sunday in 21 of Nigeria's 36 states and the federal capital territory, Obasanjo had 69 percent of the votes compared to 26 percent for Muhammadu Buhari, a former ally.

Opposition leaders accused the government of rigging the ballot.

"This is a massive rigging. The masses are going to react. They will fight," Francis Erube, an official in Buhari's party, told The Associated Press. "Obasanjo's people want to mess up this country. But the people will be not going to allow them to do that.

The election was a major test of whether democracy has taken root since Obasanjo was elected four years ago, ending 15 years of brutal military rule.

Nigeria - Africa's most populous nation - has never seen a civilian government successfully hand over power to another. Though it is one of the world's largest oil exporters, it is desperately poor and has a history of coups and unrest.

Obasanjo was once a military ruler,

but he traded his uniform for traditional robes and ran for election in 1999. In Saturday's vote, he faced 19 challengers, including Buhari. The two former army men were once close colleagues, but their relationship soured after Obasanjo accused Buhari of mismanagement.

Fearing unrest, soldiers and police patrolled the streets of the northern cities of Kaduna and Jos. But in one northern city where violence had been feared - Kano - Buhari supporters launched street celebrations, not protests, after news of an apparent lead by his party's governorship candidate.

The vote was marred by a shooting at a polling booth in the oil-producing Niger Delta, the scene of a month of ethnic and political violence that has left more than 100 people dead. Six were killed in the attack, election monitors said.

Nearly half of Nigeria's 126 million people registered for the ballot in 36 states and the capital. It was unclear how many voted, though officials said turnout was strong.

Nigeria's election commission promised to cancel results in areas with proven cases of fraud.

"Where there is substantial violence and boxes disappear, the results will not be accepted," stressed Hakeem Baba-Ahmed, commission secretary, who declared the ballot a "vast improvement" over previous elections.

Nepal postpones talks with Maoists

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Peace talks between the Nepal government and Maoist rebels aimed at ending a six-year revolt that has killed 7,200 people have been postponed, a rebel official said on Monday.

The talks, the first formal negotiations in nearly 17 months, had been due to start on Monday.

"There will be no meeting today," rebel spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara said adding fresh dates would be decided through informal talks between the two sides. There was no immediate government comment.

"The government wanted the talks to be only an introductory affair on Monday but we think substantive talks must be held on the political agenda," Mahara added.

Togadia gets bail

AFP, New Delhi

A hardline Hindu leader arrested earlier this month for defying a ban on the distribution of tridents was granted bail Monday in the western Rajasthan state, television news reported.

Praveen Togadia, general secretary of the right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), which is allied with India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP, was charged with making inflammatory speeches and distributing tridents -- three-pronged spears that are the traditional weapons of Hindu warrior gods.

He had been in custody since April 13.

On Monday, judge Hari Singh Punia in the state's Ajmer district ordered the bail and asked Togadia not to repeat his alleged offenses. He was also ordered to present himself in court whenever summoned, a number of news channels reported.

Musharraf terms Pak constitutional amendments legal

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, who is under pressure to quit as Chief of Army in view of agitation by opposition parties over legality of his constitutional amendments, has decided not to submit the Legal Framework Order, which incorporated the amendments, to parliament for ratification.

The decision was taken during an unscheduled meeting attended by Musharraf, Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali and president of ruling pro-military Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q) Sujaat Hussain on Sunday night.

The meeting was held as the deadlock over the LFO snow-balled into a major constitutional crisis with opposition parties continuing to disrupt parliament sessions.

Earlier, Hussain negotiated with Islamist alliance Muttahida Majlis-e Amal (MMA) for a compromise but the talks broke down after Musharraf declined to quit as chief of army.

Musharraf and PML-Q assert that LFO, which legalised the election of Musharraf as president through referendum last year, was legal while opposition say they would abide only by the 1973 constitution and would not recognise LFO.

Rejecting the opposition's stand, Hussain told the media after his meeting with Musharraf that by contesting elections under LFO, the opposition accepted it as part of constitution.

"Therefore, there is no need to take it to parliament for approval," he said.

In view of disruption of parliament proceedings, Musharraf reportedly differed his plans to address the joint session of the House. Last night's meeting reviewed the situation, particularly the latest disturbance in the senate, and decided that the joint session of

Parliament be postponed till a conducive time, PML-Q leaders said.

Jamali and Hussain assured Musharraf that the president's position would be protected inside and outside Parliament, local daily Dawn quoted officials as saying. The three decided to take a hard line against the combined opposition and not to give away anything on contentious issues, the paper said.

They discussed the proposal that president should himself hold talks with opposition leaders to work out constitutional package by striking down controversial articles of the LFO.

Hussain said the future talks with opposition on the LFO would be held only outside parliament.

He said if the opposition wanted to discuss the LFO inside parliament then it should bring it in the shape of an amendment bill on private members' day. In that case, he said, the ruling alliance would definitely debate constitutionality of the LFO.

MMA Leader Qazi Hussain Ahmad warned that if government decides to dissolve parliament, Musharraf and Jamali would have to go.

Qazi Hussain told media in Lahore on Sunday that if parliament and assemblies were to be dissolved, Jamali would lose his post as prime minister and Musharraf his presidency.

"We are only the members of the National Assembly and can successfully return again in the next elections," he said, adding the ruling group would be the ultimate loser.

Meanwhile, Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), comprising moderate parties, suggested a dialogue between opposition and government to resolve differences over LFO.