

## US astronaut on 1st space flight after Columbia crash

AFP, Baikonur

Russian space veterans cautiously wheeled out a Soyuz craft to a Kazakh launch-pad Thursday to send the first American and his Russian partner into space since the Columbia shuttle disaster.

Less than three months since the shuttle disintegrated on re-entry, killing seven crew, Edward Lu and Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko will blast off Saturday from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan for a six-month mission on the International Space Station (ISS).

Two days ahead of the launch, the 57-metre-long (188-feet) Soyuz vehicle slowly rolled out of its hangar horizontally, pushed by a locomotive along a railway track 1.2 kilometres (0.7 miles) to the launch site.

## Winnie found guilty of fraud, theft

AFP, Pretoria

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the flamboyant ex-wife of former South African president Nelson Mandela, was found guilty Thursday on fraud and theft charges involving some one million rand (131,000 dollars/119,000 euros).

Her co-accused Addy Moolman, a broker, was also found guilty.

Madikizela-Mandela, who is a member of parliament and president of the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), and Moolman had pleaded not guilty to 60 charges of fraud and 25 charges of theft.

Madikizela-Mandela was found guilty on 43 charges of fraud and 25 of theft, and Moolman on 58 charges of fraud and 25 of theft.

"The evidence of the state ... is overwhelming," said magistrate Peet Johnson, pronouncing the verdict.

The pair were charged with using letters on ANCWL letterhead paper bearing Madikizela-Mandela's signature to fraudulently obtain loans from a bank in the names of bogus league employees.

# N Korea ups rhetoric

## China calls for sincerity in nuke talks

AFP, Beijing

US and North Korean negotiators completed a second day of talks on the festering nuclear issue Thursday, as Pyongyang ratcheted up its rhetoric and host country China called for sincerity from all sides.

Washington's Asia envoy James Kelly sat down for negotiations just hours after North Korea had fired a broadside against the United States, saying the key to solving the crisis was in US hands.

"The situation on the Korean peninsula is so tense that a war may break out any moment due to the US moves," the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said in an editorial.

The attack on Iraq had shown that any country needs a "strong physical deterrent force", the agency said, urging the United States to undertake "a bold switchover" in its hostile policies toward North Korea.

"This is the master key to making the talks fruitful to satisfy the expectation and concern of the international community," it said.

The editorial, published two days after the commander of US forces in South Korea called North Korea "a thorn to the passage of peace in this region", was followed by a Chinese call for a constructive attitude.

"The issue has a complicated background and solving it requires unremitting efforts," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao told a regular briefing.

"We hope the relevant sides will show sincerity and play a constructive role."

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi Thursday told foreign media the United States would not deal with North Korea as it did with Iraq.

"I discussed the matter with [US President George W.] Bush, and we see eye to eye that the North Korea issue

should be resolved through political and diplomatic efforts," Koizumi said.

The negotiations between Kelly and diplomats from North Korea and China lasted from mid-morning to mid-afternoon at the Diaoyutai State Guest House, a walled compound in western Beijing.

"The fact that the talks continue today probably indicates that things are going as expected," a US embassy official said.

Kelly arrived back at his hotel late in the afternoon, smiling as he covered the few steps from his sedan to the entrance, but making no comments other than acknowledging that talks had taken place.

The negotiations, scheduled to end Friday, mark the first direct dialogue since the crisis over North Korea's nuclear program erupted in October.

The North Korean negotiators were led by Li Gun, the foreign ministry's deputy director for US affairs and a

former senior member of his country's delegation to the United Nations.

China was represented by Fu Ying, director of the foreign ministry's department of Asian affairs.

Despite intense media attention, the three parties have decided to keep the talks low-key, bordering on secretive.

The few details that have emerged suggest that the United States and North Korea are firmly entrenched in their previous positions.

According to South Korea's Chosun Ilbo newspaper, Kelly Wednesday urged North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons, while Li Gun repeated Pyongyang's demand for a non-aggression pact.

Kelly briefed Japanese and South Korean diplomats Wednesday on the day's events, but officials at the two Asian countries' embassies in Beijing were instructed not to divulge details.



PHOTO: AFP  
A man walks past the border fence on Thursday at Imjingak, the entrance of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea. North Korea rejected a US military commander's charge that it posed a security threat to the region, claiming the danger came from a huge US nuclear stockpile in South Korea.

# WHO declares Beijing, Toronto no-go zones

## Panic as tough quarantine measures enforced

AFP, Hong Kong

Amid scenes of panic in Beijing, China Thursday began implementing drastic quarantine measures to contain SARS after the World Health Organisation warned against travel to the Chinese capital, Shanxi province and the Canadian city of Toronto.

After covering up the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome for months, China's state-run media issued a rallying call to the nation against what it called "a savage attack against mankind".

The U-turn came as the global death toll from SARS inched higher to 253 with new fatalities in Singapore and Canada, and the World Bank warned of the growing damage being inflicted on Asia's economy.

The WHO Wednesday added the three new SARS blackspots to an earlier advisory on Hong Kong and the southern Chinese province of Guangdong,

sparking an angry reaction from Toronto and mounting anxiety in Beijing.

Shoppers besieged supermarkets in the Chinese capital, which has reported 35 SARS deaths and nearly 1,500 confirmed or suspected cases, and the airport and train stations were packed with people fleeing the city.

The Beijing government meanwhile said anybody suspected of having SARS and any area where the virus had been found would be isolated. Anybody who violated the order would be "severely punished".

The first victims of the measure were the city's prisons where employees have been banned from leaving and family visits have been stopped. China's national library was also shut for two weeks.

The semi-rural northern province of Shanxi has reported 157 cases and seven deaths from the virus, and there are fears the area's more basic medical

facilities will be overwhelmed.

In Toronto, government officials reacted with fury to the WHO's travel advisory and demanded the UN body immediately send a team to investigate the city, where most of the 16 deaths and 330 SARS cases in Canada have been recorded.

"I'm shocked that the medical evidence before us does not support this advisory," said Toronto's Mayor Mel Lastman, calling the WHO move a "gross misrepresentation".

There is no cure or vaccine for the virus which first emerged in Guangdong in November before spreading to neighbouring Hong Kong, and then onto some 25 countries around the world infecting over 4,300 people.

As travel and trade around the world are increasingly disrupted by the epidemic, financial analysts have begun issuing dire warnings about the economic impact.

## Moro rebels kill 16, take policemen hostage

AFP, Manila

Moro separatists attacked a town and ambushed two buses in the southern Philippines, killing at least 16 civilians and taking policemen and commuters hostage, the military and rebels said Thursday.

The military used helicopter gunships to repulse the latest attacks, in which about 20 people were also injured.

Four people were killed when their private bus was ambushed by guerrillas from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Carmen town late Wednesday, the military said.

As many as 12 other civilians and three guerrillas were shot dead as the MILF launched attacks on the highway near Kulabugan town on Thursday, firing on a bus and military and police outposts, military reports said.

The two towns are in the southern island of Mindanao, where the 12,500-strong MILF has been fighting to set up an independent Islamic state since 1978.

# Israel warily eyes end of Arafat era

## Tel Aviv hails Abbas victory in his cabinet showdown

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel cautiously welcomed the victory of moderate new Palestinian premier Mahmud Abbas in his cabinet showdown with Yasser Arafat, with some analysts saying Thursday the deal could mark the beginning of the end of the Arafat era.

But they also urged caution before writing off the veteran, who has survived decades of crisis and brinkmanship.

Arafat backed down Wednesday on Abbas' key demands that the moderate PLO number-two be both prime minister and interior minister, with Colonel Mohammed Dahlan as security minister with a mandate to tackle militant groups attacking Israel.

The about-face in Arafat's stubborn refusal was seen by many as a sign he is finally relinquishing his iron grip on the Palestinian leadership, opening the way to new Middle East peace initiatives.

But others pointed out that Arafat is a wily survivor and as a price for his compliance in last-minute, Egyptian-brokered talks with his leadership rival, he has managed to keep at least 12 old faces in the new cabinet.

That could trip up the new ministerial team when it goes before parliament next week, as many in the assembly want a technocratic government capable of reviving the devastated economy, weeding out corruption and ending 30 months of bloodletting.

The Jerusalem Post, a right-wing Israeli newspaper, said the collapse of Arafat's entrenched position marked a "silent coup" against the veteran leader.

In an article entitled "Bye-Bye, Yasser," it said the humiliating stand-down under massive international pressure was the result of more than a year of Israeli campaigning to have Arafat dropped, a struggle in which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon scored a notable success in convincing US President George W. Bush to back him.

"The power struggle over the last few days could be Arafat's last battle," it said, adding that once the reformist cabinet is sworn in Arafat "will be eased upstairs, if not out the door."

# Thousands of Greek, Turkish Cypriots cross 'Green Line' division

AFP, Nicosia

Hundreds of Greek and Turkish Cypriots began crossing the newly opened border between their two sides of the divided island from early Thursday, the second day since restrictions were lifted by the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

By 10:30 am (0730 GMT), some 230 Turkish Cypriots had entered the southern Greek part of Nicosia, Europe's last divided capital, while 350 Greek Cypriots had gone the other way, police said.

Most crossed on foot, with cars from the Greek side only being allowed through very slowly, causing a buildup stretching back around hundreds of metres (yards) along the two approach roads to the Ledra Palace hotel checkpoint.

There seemed to be increased bureaucracy on the Turkish side, with

Greek Cypriots being required to fill in a form that was then stamped and put in their passports.

Greek Cypriot authorities had expressed alarm Tuesday that passports might have to be stamped, implying recognition of Rauf Denktaş's breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is acknowledged only by Ankara.

Car drivers also had to purchase insurance, paying five pounds (nine dollars) for two days of third-party cover.

Insurance salesman Hussein Akarson, who had put on two extra staff to cope with the demand, said: "We have no complaints," when asked if business was good.

No cars were allowed across from the Turkish side, not only because no insurance arrangements were in place, but also because drivers licenses from the north are not being recognized.

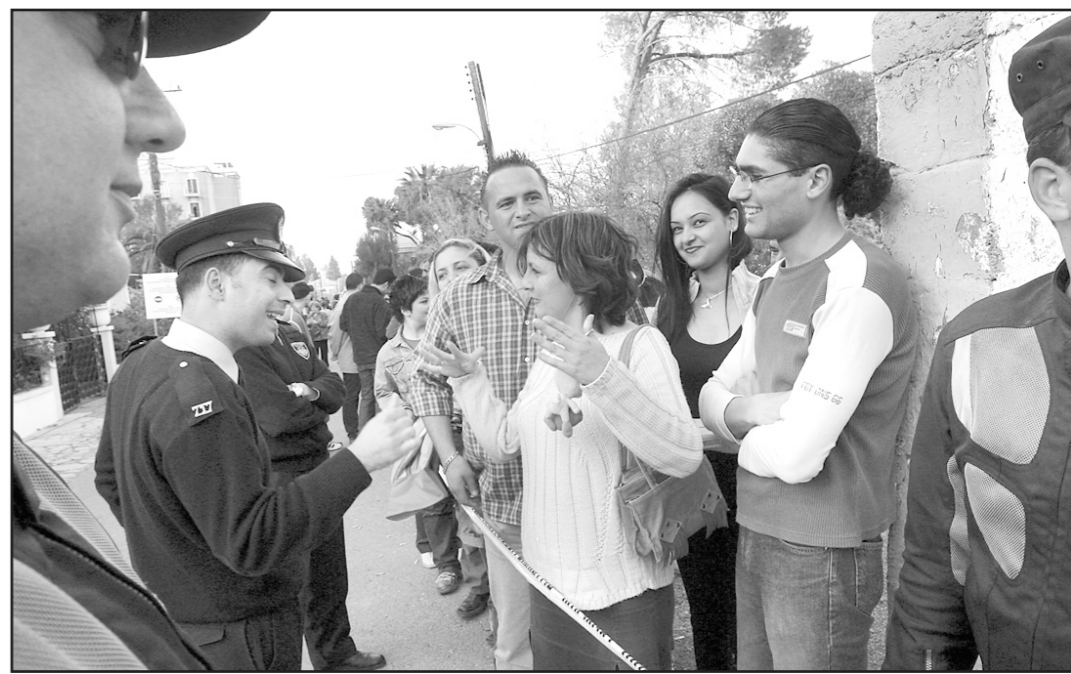


PHOTO: AFP  
A Greek-Cypriot policeman chats with a Turkish-Cypriot woman waiting in line to cross the Greek-Cypriot checkpoint in Nicosia on Thursday.