

US, N Korea agree to keep diplomatic channels open

Pyongyang pushing ahead with 'deterrence'

AFP, Beijing

The United States and North Korea have agreed to keep diplomatic channels open after talks on the nuclear crisis ended early with President George W. Bush accusing Pyongyang of reverting to "blackmail", China said Friday.

They have also agreed on the need to seek a peaceful solution to the festering showdown.

Despite the early conclusion of the talks, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said the meeting "signifies a good beginning."

The ministry said in a statement that all sides "agreed to maintain contacts through diplomatic channels regarding continuing the process of talks."

"We hope that all sides can continue to make efforts to peacefully resolve the Korean nuclear issue," Li was quoted by the official Xinhua news agency as saying.

"On this the North Korean and US sides both expressed agreement and

(expressed) belief that during the talks all sides presented their position, fully exchanged opinions and deepened mutual understanding."

An official traveling with visiting French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told his counterpart that "... the idea of resorting to force was not mentioned at all."

"It is a significant point... since some wondered during the war in Iraq if there would not be a strike on North Korea," added the official, paraphrasing Wen.

"The search for a peaceful solution is what is being implemented."

US sources said North Korea told the United States during the talks that it has nuclear weapons and hinted it may sell or use them depending on US actions.

They said the head of the North Korean delegation Li Gun had also told US envoy James Kelly that Pyongyang had gone ahead with reprocessing 8,000 spent fuel rods at its Yongbyon plant, which could produce enough weapons grade plutonium for several more

nuclear bombs.

Originally scheduled to run through Friday, the talks ended ahead of schedule after Kelly and the North Koreans had a brief, informal meeting with their Chinese host.

"The US and North Korean delegations had separate meetings with Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing this morning. They also had a brief informal trilateral meeting," a US embassy spokesman here said.

Kelly left Beijing for Seoul Friday afternoon.

The early conclusion of the discussions came after Bush said in Washington overnight that North Korea had reverted to "blackmail" in the two sides' first direct high-level encounter since the crisis erupted in October over the North's nuclear ambitions.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said the talks had featured "strong views" on all sides and that the United States would not bow to blackmail, threats or "bellicose statements."

China's Li cautioned that the Korean

nuclear issue was "very complicated and sensitive," but the key was to "not mind the other side's rhetoric," but "pay attention to its actions."

Meanwhile, North Korea said Friday that it was pushing ahead building military "deterrence" a day after US sources said the Stalinist state had admitted it possessed nuclear weapons.

An editorial in Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of North Korea's ruling Workers Party, made no direct reference to the talks in Beijing at which US sources said the admission had been made.

However it indicated that North Korea was taking a hard-line on its determination to build up its weapons stockpile.

"Our strong military forces have emerged as the surest means to guarantee peace and prevent a war at this age of confusion," the daily said in an editorial monitored by South Korea's Yonhap news agency.



This still image taken on Thursday from exclusive video obtained by the Cable News Network (CNN) reportedly shows Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (C-R) kissing his first wife, Sajida, at an undisclosed location in Iraq. CNN reported obtaining four family videos earlier this week from an Iraqi who said he had taken them from the home of Sajida. Others were not identified.

PHOTO: AFP



Nazim Alam Mula, 7, sits in front of houses destroyed by a cyclone in Baliabil Mankachar on Friday some 285 km from the Assam state capital Guwahati. Nazim's parents were among the 44 people killed by the cyclone on April 22 when it lashed at least five districts of Assam and injured 2,000 people.

PHOTO: AFP

Bush is better informed than his dad

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush said Thursday that he was better informed than his father, former president George Bush, and did not spend much time discussing the Iraq war effort with him.

"I really don't spend a lot of time hashing over policy with him," he told NBC News. "He knows that I am much better informed than he could possibly be."

"I check in with him on occasion, but now, we don't talk every day," he added.

"Our relationship is more of -- and our conversations are more along the line of -- a dad and a son: a dad conveying to his son how much he loves him, which is important, even at the age of 56 years old, it's important," Bush said.

US to propose end of Iraq sanctions next week

AFP, Washington

The United States plans to propose next week a UN Security Council resolution lifting all international sanctions against Iraq and putting oil revenues under US control until an interim authority takes over in Baghdad, The Washington Post said Friday.

Crafted Wednesday at a meeting of top White House advisers, the resolution delegates the United Nations to a consultative role through a special representative of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, senior US officials told the daily.

The resolution would firmly endorse control by the United States and its military allies over international involvement in Iraq until a permanent, representative government is in place, the daily said.

While still being drafted, the proposal contains specific instructions for the Iraqi oil industry, the profits of which would be moved from UN control to an Iraqi Central Bank and used on reconstruction activities designated either by the Pentagon or by the Iraqi Interim Authority once it is in place, officials involved with the discussions said.

An international financial authority such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank would monitor the disbursements of the oil funds, they added.

The administration of President George W. Bush quickly began drawing up the proposal to lift the sanctions on Iraq, in the wake of France's call to suspend the sanctions earlier this week - only days after the US called for ending them altogether.

US officials suspected that the

French were trying to preempt a sanctions-lifting resolution, the US officials said.

"We thought, we need to fill in the blank here and start talking about the end stage" before others move in on the council, an official said. "Had France not done what they did... we might have waited a week or two."

The quickness of the resolution decision also led to the adoption of the Pentagon's proposal for a broad elimination of all UN control over Iraq, instead of the State Department's preferred gradual approach, the daily said.

The Washington Post said US officials see June 3, when the currently extended UN-administered oil-for-food program for Iraq expires, as an internal US deadline for the complete lifting of UN control.

BBC chief attacks US media war coverage

REUTERS, London

US broadcasters' coverage of the Iraq war was so unquestioningly patriotic and so lacking in impartiality that it threatened the credibility of America's electronic media, the head of the BBC said on Thursday.

BBC Director General Greg Dyke singled out for criticism the fast growing News Corp. Ltd.'s Fox News Channel, owned by media baron Rupert Murdoch, and Clear Channel Communications Inc., the largest operator of radio stations in the United States, with over 1,200 stations, for special criticism.

"Personally, I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during this war," Dyke said in a speech at a University of London conference.

Pak nukes to deter any pre-emptive strike

Musharraf rules out compromise on his position as army chief

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is enough of a deterrent to dissuade any country from launching a pre-emptive strike against it, President Pervez Musharraf said Thursday.

His comments follow threats from India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha earlier this month that India would be justified in taking pre-emptive action against the Pakistan border since it has a much better case against Pakistan than the United States has in Iraq.

India accuses Pakistan of training and arming Islamic separatists in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan says it only gives moral support and no mate-

rial help. The South Asian nuclear rivals have fought two wars over Kashmir, since they gained independence from Britain in 1947.

"Let me tell you that Pakistan's turn will not come after Iraq," Musharraf said at a news briefing in Islamabad. "No one can launch a pre-emptive strike on Pakistan because we are a nuclear power, we are a missile power."

"We are fully capable to face and resist every situation... we are fully capable to watch our interests," he said. India and Pakistan were on war footing last year after New Delhi blamed Islamabad for an attack by Islamic militants on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. Pakistan denied involvement. Tensions eased after intense diplomacy by the United States

and Britain.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee last week conditionally offered talks with Pakistan on Kashmir and other issues.

Musharraf voiced some skepticism over the offer, but added it was a sign of improvement.

AFP adds: Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has vowed not to give up the post of army chief and said he would hold it simultaneously with the presidency as long as necessary, press reports said Friday.

"I am not giving up the uniform," Musharraf told newspaper editors late Thursday. "I know that it doesn't look good to keep both the offices... I am not ignorant, and therefore I will not keep them longer than necessary."

Arafat calls for release of ME peace road map

AFP, Madrid

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called once again for the immediate release of an international "road map" due to lead to the creation of a Palestinian state, in remarks published in a Spanish newspaper on Friday.

Expressing impatience over repeated delays in the release of the document, Arafat told the daily ABC newspaper that "it is indispensable to publish and immediately put into practice the road map," particularly since a Palestinian cabinet had now been set up.

"First it was put off until after the elections in Palestine, which could not be held because of the occupation of our land, then it was delayed until after the Israeli elections, and then it was put aside until after an Israeli government had been set up. When that was formed, it was put off until the creation of a Palestinian government," Arafat said in the interview, published in Spanish.

IANs, Paris

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has expressed serious concern over the continued threats by the US administration to Syria.

Mohamad, who is on a private visit to France, cautioned the US against launching an attack on Syria under the pretext that the government there was hosting terrorists or that it had weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

"They attacked Iraq for the same reasons and they did not find any (WMDs). Now they are saying the same things against Syria, but I don't believe the allegations against the Syrian government," Mohamad told IANs in an interview.

He said that by invading Iraq, the US had set an extremely dangerous precedent where any powerful country could use its military force to impose its wishes on weaker nations.

"(It's like saying) if I don't like your leader, I will just march in with my army and change the set up," said Mohamad, who has been a vocal critic of the US invasion of Iraq.

"There is a lot of fear all over the world. No nation is secure any more." Welcoming the French stance against the US, the Malaysian prime minister said that even though the French could not prevent the invasion, he was happy that the country chose to speak out openly against the US.

"They voiced the opinion of a vast

majority of nations and even if their actions could not prevent the war, it is better that they tried rather than just sitting and watching while all the international norms and laws were being crushed under the might of the invading army," Mohamad said.

On the reconstruction of Iraq, Mohamad reassured that it should be handled entirely by the UN.

"It cannot be left to the invading army," he said. He also opposed the US idea of using Iraqi oil for reconstruction of the country.

"I can agree if they use the Iraqi oil for bringing emergency relief to the Iraqi people, but not if they use the Iraqi oil for undoing the damage inflicted by the war," Mohamad said.

Militants attack BSF camp in Kashmir: 4 killed Violence claims 9 others

AFP, Srinagar

Two Indian border guards and two Kashmiri militants were killed Friday in a suicide attack by rebels on a security camp in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.

The attackers, armed with automatic rifles and grenades, launched a raid on the sector headquarters of the Border Security Force (BSF) in Bandipora, 60 km north of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

In the ensuing firefight, two BSF guards and two militants were killed, while four border guards were injured.

"The injured were shifted to hospital," a police spokesman said, adding that security force reinforcements had been rushed to the area and searches launched for possible other militants.

"The firing stopped with the killing of the two militants," the spokesman

said.

A lesser-known militant group, the al Madina regiment, contacted newspaper groups in Srinagar to claim responsibility for the attack.

Fedayeen or suicide attacks were common in Kashmir between 1999 and 2001 but their frequency declined after the September 11 attacks in the United States.

Meanwhile, three people were killed and 34 injured in an explosion Friday on the lawns of a courthouse in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.

The explosion occurred in the town of Patan, 27 kilometers (17 miles) north of the summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Moreover, suspected Kashmiri rebels have killed a ruling party official, two Indian soldiers and two alleged informers in restive Kashmir, while a sixth person died in a gunbattle, police said Friday.

Thousands quarantined in Beijing as govt denies martial law imminent

AFP, Beijing

More than 4,000 people in Beijing have been quarantined in their homes and thousands more in hospitals as the government Friday was forced to deny martial law was imminent to combat SARS.

"We have an estimated 4,000 people (in quarantine). These people had close contact with patients," said Guo Jiyong, deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Health Bureau.

"They're being quarantined at home."

He said they were in addition to the 877 confirmed SARS patients and 954 suspected SARS victims being kept in Beijing hospitals.

The revelation came as a second major hospital was sealed off and orders were issued by China's State Council, or

cabinet, for students and migrant workers to stay in Beijing to prevent the virus penetrating China's vast hinterlands.

"Before we were isolating the infectious disease ward within the hospital compound. Now the whole hospital is cordoned off," said an official surnamed Zhao at the Ditan Hospital where more than 100 SARS patients are being treated and some 600 medical staff were told they could not go home.

It follows the quarantine of the People's Hospital Thursday where more than 1,000 workers and patients spent their second day in isolation after up to 55 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) cases were found.

The Beijing Youth Daily said the 1,000 included doctors, nurses, patients and anyone else who happened to be in the vicinity when it was ordered shut.



PHOTO: AFP

A local woman wearing a protective mask, stands in a subway train in Shanghai on Friday. The World Health Organisation (WHO) said that Shanghai would see a jump in the number of new SARS cases in China's largest city, although the new tally would fall far short of the hundreds of cases reported in Beijing.

E Asia seeks joint effort against SARS

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

East Asian health officials and experts called Friday for a coordinated effort against SARS as they laid the groundwork for an emergency regional summit on the crisis.

Delegates discussed measures taken by individual countries to contain Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) ahead of a health ministers' meeting here on Saturday and a summit in Bangkok on Tuesday.

"Several coordinated activities aimed at strengthening regional responses to combat SARS will facilitate current national control measures and lessen a country's burden to deal with the problems unilaterally," said Mohamad Taha Arif, Malaysia's director-general of health.

The talks in the Malaysian capital are a prelude to Tuesday's unprecedented special summit in Bangkok of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China, where the outbreak originated.