

# Positions of US, Russia on Iran are close: Putin

AFP, Saint Petersburg

The positions of Moscow and Washington on Iran are "closer than they seem," Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday following talks here with his US counterpart George W. Bush.

"The position of Russia and the US on the issue are much closer than they seem," said Putin.

"We do not need to be convinced of the fact that there should no proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," he said.

"President Bush and I have a full understanding on this," he said.

"This is exactly why we can call each other friends."

On a more cautious note, however, Putin said the United States must not use Russia's nuclear cooperation with Iran as a pretext for pushing Russian companies operating in the country out of the lucrative market.

"On Iran, we are against the pretext of using the nuclear weapons of program in Iran as a lever in unfair business competition against us," said Putin.

"But we will continue working with all, including the United States, in order to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction everywhere, including Iran," said Putin.

Russia has vowed to complete construction of Iran's first nuclear reactor at Bushehr, despite US concerns that Tehran was using the project as a cover for a covert nuclear weapons program.

Bush, for his part, told a joint press conference that both sides were "concerned" about Iran's nuclear program.

"Russia and the United States have mutual concerns about the advanced Iranian nuclear program," Bush said.

"I appreciate Vladimir Putin's understanding of the issue and his willingness to work with me and others to solve this potential problem," the US president added.

Moscow and Washington intend to continue their strategic partnership despite disagreements over Iraq, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday after talks here with US counterpart George W. Bush.

"Of course we are aware of the questions being raised as to whether relations between Russia and US will withstand the test of time," Putin said at a joint press conference following their first direct meeting since the war.

"We reiterated with President Bush that there is no alternative to our continued strategic partnership," said Putin.

"Our relations are stronger than the events that tested it," said Putin. The informal summit between Bush and Putin lasted for just over an hour in Putin's native city amid its 300th anniversary celebrations.

Putin and Bush also signed formal documents putting into effect a strategic arms reduction treaty that slashes the two sides nuclear weapons to a range of 1,700 to 2,200 nuclear warheads by the year 2012.

"This treaty also improves the regime of non-proliferation," said Putin. "This is all more appropriate in the fight against international terrorism," he said. "But now we must work on the implementation of that treaty."

## Blair duped Britons over Iraq war, says Clare Short

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair duped the public over the threat posed by Saddam Hussein in order to ensure Britain invaded Iraq, Clare Short, who resigned from his cabinet, told a British Sunday newspaper.

"There was political spin put on the intelligence information to create a sense of urgency," Short, who stepped down as International Development Secretary following the end of the conflict in Iraq, told the Sunday Telegraph.

"It was a political decision that came from the prime minister," Short told the right-wing weekly newspaper.

"We were misled. I think we were deceived in the way it was done," Short said.

Blair's office flatly denied Short's allegations.



PHOTO: AFP

(From L-R): Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis, US First Lady Laura Bush, Russian President Vladimir Putin, an unidentified woman, Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee, an unidentified woman, US President George W. Bush, Russian First Lady Lyudmila Putina sit at a table during a dinner in Peterhof Palace outside St. Petersburg on Saturday. President Vladimir Putin preached the idea of a "greater Europe" with a place for Russia as he hosted 24 of the continent's leaders amid the czarist splendor of St. Petersburg.

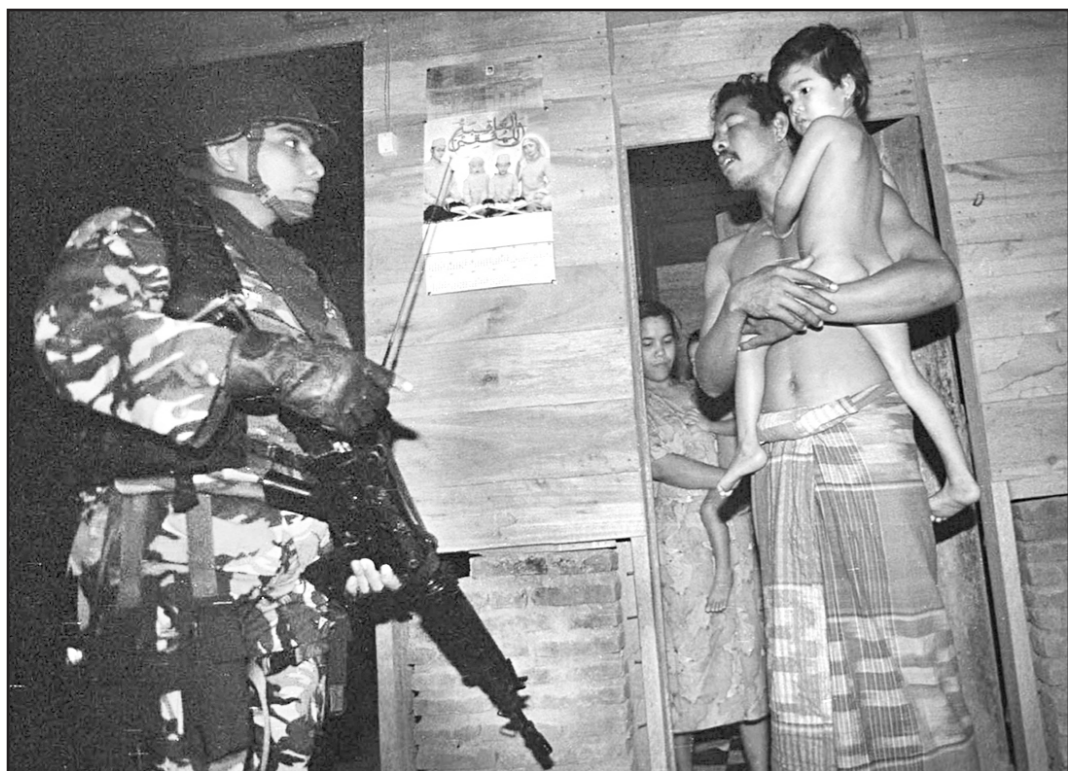


PHOTO: AFP

A soldier questions an Acehese family during a search for Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebels at civilians houses in East Aceh on Saturday. Indonesian military reported clashes in eight locations in Aceh province on Friday as troops were cornering separatist rebels in a bid to separate the guerillas from the population, the military said.

## Wolfowitz visits last Cold War frontier

AFP, Seoul

US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz made a moral-boosting visit Sunday to American troops on the world's last Cold War frontier.

The trip to a US base on the edge of the inter-Korean buffer zone came as a South Korean navy boat fired warning shots at North Korean fishing vessels which intruded over a tense sea border in the Yellow Sea.

The incursion, which fueled security jitters in South Korea, comes nearly eight months into a stand-off over North Korea's nuclear weapons drive.

Pyeongyang fired a barrage of shrill warnings at Seoul and Tokyo last week, accusing the allies of supporting Washington's tough stance against the Stalinist country.

Wolfowitz is to visit Japan Monday after talks with South Korean officials to exchange views on the nuclear crisis.

## Israel eases WB, Gaza closure as truce in the making

AFP, Gaza City

Israel on Sunday eased its closure of the Palestinian territories three days ahead of a US-convened peace summit and amid expectations the two sides could declare a long-sought truce.

The army relaxed its blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip overnight, as part of a package of measures to ease the hardships on the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas was to leave the West Bank town of Ramallah for Jordan to prepare for Wednesday's summit in the Red Sea resort of Aqaba, his office said.

"The complete closure has been lifted from midnight (2100 GMT)," an Israeli military spokesman said.

Israel has also announced a phased handover of security control in Gaza and West Bank towns to the Palestinians, following "positive" talks between Israeli

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Abbas last Thursday.

The closure of the territories, effectively imposed two months after the Intifada broke out in late September 2000, has left the Palestinian economy in tatters.

It has prevented Palestinian laborers from reaching jobs in Israel and hampered trade flow with the Jewish state and the rest of the world.

Palestinian security sources said 4,500 men aged 28 and above were allowed to cross into Israel from the Gaza Strip on Sunday, compared with an average of 30,000 before the Intifada.

Figures for the West Bank were not immediately available.

The sources also said a security outpost and custom office were destroyed by the army early Sunday in the northern Strip, while the town of Beit Hanoun, likewise north of Gaza City, was still occupied by Israeli forces.

A leading Israeli newspaper

said both Israel and the Palestinians could declare a ceasefire Wednesday at the Aqaba peace summit for an initial period of three weeks.

"The important announcement to come out of the summit should be that of a comprehensive ceasefire initially lasting around three weeks," wrote Maariv.

After the three-week period, Israel will demand that Palestinian security forces move to prevent anti-Israeli attacks by arresting militants, according to the newspaper.

"We are going through critical days and if the ceasefire holds, it could be the end of the Intifada," or uprising against the Israeli occupation, wrote the paper, quoting Israeli defense officials.

Abbas's cabinet has said talks with radical groups to obtain a truce are "ongoing" and an answer is expected in the coming days.

## 3 killed in Saudi shootout

AFP, Riyadh

Two Saudi security men died and at least two others were wounded, one seriously, in a shootout with two armed men in the northern province of Hail, the regional governor said in remarks published Sunday.

Prince Saud bin Abdulmohsen told Al-Watan newspaper that trouble erupted late Saturday at a checkpoint in Turba, 200 km from Hail city, close to the border with Jordan.

One of the two suspects was killed while the other escaped, the daily said, adding that a third security man was wounded.

The two suspects were stopped at the checkpoint and asked to produce identification papers. The driver, believed to be Abdullah al-Ajlan, was wanted by security authorities, the newspaper said, without revealing why.

The two suspects sped away in their jeep and started firing at police who gave chase.

A grenade was thrown at the police killing two and wounding two others, the daily said.

## Countdown begins for arms surrender in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Coalition commanders opened weapons collection points around Iraq on Sunday as they began a two-week countdown to the imposition of new firearms controls in a bid to stem post-war lawlessness.

But by midday none of the designated police stations visited by AFP correspondents reported even a single weapon had been turned in.

Many Iraqis said they were baffled by the policy and would be unwilling to give up their treasured weapons despite the pending ban.

"Why should anyone want to just give away their weapon when they can sell it for good money?" said Arkan al-Zebaki, waving a 1950s vintage Webley and Scott pistol at Baghdad's open-air arms market.

"In any case why would any self-respecting Iraqi want to turn in their weapon to an American, particularly at a police station?"

For the past three days, coalition radio has broadcast appeals to Iraqis to turn in the huge arsenal of military hardware that has passed into civilian hands since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's armed forces.

"We have also been using the loudspeakers that our psychological operations teams have. Flyers in Arabic will be posted around the city," a coalition military spokesman said.

The new regulations that come into force on June 15 will not require Iraqis to completely abandon their love affair with the Kalashnikov.

They will be allowed to retain pistols, shotguns and rifles up to 7.62 mm, the calibre of the famed Russian firearm, for self-defence, provided they do not take them out

of their homes and businesses.

Anyone wanting to carry arms on the street will need a special permit from the occupation administration which has laid down detailed procedures for weapons surrenders to prevent coalition troops mistaking them for armed attacks.

Those wanting to hand in weapons are supposed to obtain a clear plastic bag from a collection point, take it home and place the disassembled firearm inside.

"We think it is going to be a successful policy because of the good Iraqi citizens who want to see law and order restored," the military spokesman said.

But at the arms market, which continues an underground existence despite repeated raids by US troops, buyers and sellers alike said they rejected the coalition policy.

"For us a weapon is a badge of honour," said arms dealer Abbas Fadhel. "Even Saddam didn't dare to take away our weapons. In fact he used to give people rifles or shotguns as a present on big state occasions."

Fadhel has only pistols and ammunition on display for fear of another US raid or a robbery in the ultra-lawless looters' market.

But he said he has mortars for 75 dollars and rocket-propelled grenades for 100 dollars in his home just 10 minutes away.

Among the customers there seems to be little understanding of the new weapons policy, despite the publicity campaign. Many are convinced the occupation administration is determined to ban all weapons and leave Iraqis defenceless.

## 'Tobacco is weapon of mass destruction'

AFP, Chicago

A top US cancer specialist Saturday called tobacco a "weapon of mass destruction," and colleagues urged slapping an extra two-dollar-a-pack tax on cigarettes and banning smoking in more public places.

The American Society of Clinical Oncology called for the steps as part of a wider crackdown on smoking-related diseases and deaths, which it billed as the world's number one public health threat.

In a keynote speech at the society's 39th annual meeting, ASCO president Paul Bunn criticised existing tobacco-control measures as fragmented and ineffective and said a more comprehensive approach was needed to combat what one expert called "an industry-made pandemic of preventable diseases."

"ASCO calls for an urgent and comprehensive review of the global tobacco issue -- on its many levels -- to achieve the total elimination of tobacco addiction and tobacco use," said Bunn. "Saving lives is our number one priority."

Cancer experts estimate that smoking-related illnesses were responsible for 100 million deaths in the last century, and will account for one billion in this century if the number of smokers continues to rise as projected.

The next 25 years will see "the largest industry-made pandemic of preventable diseases and early death in the recorded history of our world," said John Seffrin, chief executive officer of the American Cancer Society.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli "Peace Now" activist holds up a placard during a demonstration outside Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's residence in Jerusalem on Saturday.

## Indian politics heating up with hot summer

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A searing summer wave is sweeping India. And so is the heat of electoral politics. Much of the political heat, which is rising slowly, is because of the elections due later this year in four states: Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Chattisgarh ruled by Congress.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi has put the party into election mode at a just-concluded high-level conclave of the party in Srinagar. The conclave was restricted to chief ministers of fifteen Congress-ruled states and some senior party leaders.

In her inaugural address to the Srinagar conclave, Sonia has made it clear that development and governance is going to be a key poll plank of Congress. She has sought to showcase Congress-ruled states as models of good governance.

The Congress chief attacked the economic performance of Vajpayee dispensation saying "economic growth rates have fallen since 1998 and the rate of investment has been the casualty." She criticised

Vajpayee government's "failure" on employment generation front and asked party chief ministers to project Congress as a pro-poor party by going in for massive food-for-work programmes and launching a national employment guarantee scheme.

Sonia Gandhi also asked her party men not to allow RSS and VHP to polarise the society and divert focus from the theme of governance. Analysts also see in Congress' shift on the question of alliance a tacit acceptance that the party has little option other than joining hands with some regional parties to grab power.

Another important indicator of poll fever is the zealotry with which Congress and BJP are eyeing for upper caste votes. In Srinagar, Sonia Gandhi has endorsed the move by her party government in Rajasthan to have percent job reservation for economically weaker people among upper castes and a few days later BJP made a similar demand and added that a national commission would be set up for this.