

Manila announces truce with MILF

AP, Manila

The Philippine government announced a ceasefire deal with Moro rebels Friday, agreeing to drop arrest warrants against rebel leaders for alleged terrorism to pave the way for peace talks as early as next week.

The deal was reached with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which has been fighting for an independent Muslim territory in Mindanao and other islands of the southern Philippines for about three decades and has been blamed for deadly bombings and other terrorist activities.

"Today the peace panels of our government and the MILF have agreed on a mutual cessation of hostilities," President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said in a statement.

"I call on the panels to immediately enter in formal talks towards a final peace agreement," she said.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Blas Ople said earlier that negotiations with the rebels could reopen in

Malaysia next week.

The way for resumed talks was opened last month when an MILF leader formally denounced terrorism, a top government demand. Arroyo had accused the rebels of ties with the regional militant Islamic network Jemaah Islamiyah, said to be linked to al-Qaida.

The Philippine military launched an offensive against the 12,000-strong rebel movement earlier this year amid an escalation in rebel attacks and bombings, and sporadic peace talks fell apart.

Aware that past talks have failed, Arroyo sounded an optimistic tone with the new cease-fire.

"I ask our people to give peace a chance," she said. "As we address the roots of rebellion and secession, I am confident that we shall also effectively isolate and marginalize the dwindling terrorist cells in Mindanao and across our seas in the region."

"Peace is at hand. We shall forge the political will to preserve it for all generations of Filipinos."

'Time running out' to secure Iraq

BBC ONLINE

A high-level advisory team sent to Iraq by the United States Defence Department says Washington has a limited opportunity to restore order in Iraq and that urgent action is needed.

The next three months are a vital window of opportunity, that could close without progress in providing security, basic services, and political and economic opportunity for the Iraqi people, the team's report says.

Iraq has been beset by problems with security and basic services since the end of the conflict and the team says that without rapid change there is a growing potential for real chaos.

The BBC's Fergal Parkinson, in Washington, says that with the mounting death toll among soldiers and increasing lawlessness in Iraq, the Bush administration is facing

huge pressure.

The report was issued as US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz began an extensive five-day tour of Iraq.

Wolfowitz said he was seeking to understand what was needed to complete, as he put it, the transition to government of, by and for the Iraqi people.

The US report assessing post-war reconstruction efforts in Iraq was drawn up by a five-strong team of independent experts.

The team is led by John Hamre, comptroller of the defence department during the Clinton era, and current head of the respected Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

His team spent nearly two weeks in Iraq at the end of June at the invitation of US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and the head of the US-led civilian administration

in Baghdad, Paul Bremer.

Dr Hamre and his team urge the Bush administration to immediately "turbo-boost" reconstruction efforts by swiftly injecting funding and personnel and securing the involvement of other countries and the United Nations.

"The next three months are crucial to turning around the security situation, which is volatile in key parts of the country," the report says, adding that the US must also be ready "to stay the course in Iraq for several years".

The team says that more Iraqis should be employed in the rebuilding - and communication with Iraqis must be improved, singling out the new Iraqi Governing Council as playing a vital role.

"We owe it to our people in the field, and to Iraqis, to provide everything necessary to get this right. US credibility and national interest

depend upon it," the report says.

A defence department spokesman told the BBC that the team had briefed officials, but they had yet to decide how their recommendations could best be put into practice.

The BBC's Jonny Dymond, in Baghdad, says that on average there are 13 attacks on coalition forces, usually US troops, every day.

These can range from an individual taking a pot-shot at troops to a multiple rocket-propelled grenade attack, our correspondent says.

Although there were no reported attacks on coalition forces on Thursday, the day was marred when a third tape with a recording purporting to be Saddam Hussein was broadcast on Arabic television.



A member of a civic group hold a picture of British Prime Minister Tony Blair during a demonstration in front of the British Embassy in Tokyo on Friday to denounce Blair's role in the Iraq war hours before his arrival for talks with Japanese Premier Junichiro Koizumi.

British press tars Blair for changing tune over WMD

AFP, London

The British press Friday accused Prime Minister Tony Blair of flip-flopping over Iraq by admitting that finding weapons of mass destruction was not vital to justify the war.

"Blair moves the goalposts" headlined the right-wing tabloid Daily Mail, adding in its editorial that "this was Blair the brilliant contortionist trying to have it both ways."

In a speech Thursday to a joint session of the US Congress Blair said: "If we are wrong (and weapons of mass destruction are not found), we will have destroyed a threat that at its least is responsible for inhuman carnage and suffering. That is something I am confident history will forgive."

He went on: "If we are right, as I believe with every fiber of instinct

and conviction I have that we are, and we do not act, then we will have hesitated in the face of this menace when we should have given leadership."

"That is something history will not forgive," Blair said to a huge round of applause.

Opposition politicians and critics of the war joined the press in raising concerns over Blair's speech.

Liberal Democrat peer and former Labour minister Shirley Williams said Blair's comments put the legal justification for Britain's involvement in the war in doubt.

"I wish that it had been made clearer, when he walked away from the WMD argument, that that, of course, for the UK at least, undermines the legal basis on which we went to war," Williams said.

Border villagers flee for safety as Indo-Pak troops trade shells

AFP, Jammu

More than 20 families fled for safety and 10 Pakistani bunkers were damaged Friday when Indian and Pakistani troops traded mortar fire in Kashmir, Indian officials said.

A defence ministry official said two civilians were wounded in the village of Swajan, 225 km west of Indian Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, when it was hit by more than 30 Pakistani shells.

He said several buildings were damaged in the village and that more than 20 families left the village, which lies on the de facto Kashmir border between India and Pakistan.

"In retaliatory fire more than 10 Pakistani bunkers were smashed," the official said. There were no immediate reports of casualties on the Pakistani side.

Indian and Pakistani troops regularly exchange fire over the 767-kilometer (475-mile) Line of Control that divides Kashmir. Officials invariably charge the other side with setting off the incidents.

Violence has persisted despite moves between India and Pakistan to mend ties which had reached crisis level after a December 2001 attack by Islamic militants on the Indian parliament. The two countries in recent weeks have reappointed ambassadors and resumed a bus service.

Indian forces accuse Pakistani troops of opening fire to provide cover for Islamic militants crossing the de facto border to take part in the 14-year insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir.

Pakistan says it provides only moral and diplomatic support to an "indigenous" movement in India's sole Muslim-majority state.



A street entertainer guides his goat and monkey as he walks through floodwaters in a street of Lahore on Thursday. A heavy rainfall has left several main streets of the city flooded, meanwhile at least 10 people were dead after heavy winds and rains that buffeted several Pakistani cities.

India-Pakistan must have early talks, says Musharraf

ANI, London

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said that both Pakistan and India must take initiatives for an early comprehensive dialogue on all issues, including Kashmir to normalise relations between the two.

"Pakistan has been emphasising the need for early resumption of a comprehensive dialogue to address the Kashmir issue, as it is the main impediment to the development of normal relations between the two countries," Musharraf said in Algiers at the end of his two-day official visit to Algeria.

Recounting the number of confidence-building measures announced by Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali for carrying out a sustained and substantive dialogue with New Delhi, Musharraf, speaking at a banquet hosted by Algerian President Abdelaziz

Bouteflika, said the international community must convey Islamabad's concerns over the situation in Kashmir.

President Bouteflika said his country would support all people's legitimate right to self-determination.

On the issue of terrorism, both leaders also affirmed their support to end this scourge. "Pakistan is strongly opposed to all forms and manifestations of terrorism, as we ourselves are a victim of terrorism," Musharraf said.

"Pakistan has absolutely zero interest in keeping any foreign national suspect, in fact. When we catch any non-Pakistani suspect terrorist, we want to send him out as soon as possible," adding that Pakistan's decision to support the international campaign against terrorism was based on principle and its national interests.

Democrats eye potential grounds for Bush impeachment

REUTERS, Concord

US Democratic presidential candidate Bob Graham said on Thursday there were grounds to impeach President Bush if he was found to have led America to war under false pretenses.

While Graham did not call for Bush's impeachment, he said if the president lied about the reasons for going to war with Iraq it would be more serious than former President Bill Clinton's lie under oath about his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. "If in fact we went to war under false pretenses, that is a very serious charge," Graham, the senior US

senator from Florida, told reporters in New Hampshire.

"If the standard of impeachment is the one the House Republicans used against Bill Clinton, this clearly comes within that standard," he said.

Democrats and some Republicans have raised questions about the unsubstantiated claim Bush made in his January State of the Union speech that Iraq was seeking uranium from Africa in its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

Graham's comments came as reporters followed up on his remarks earlier this week that any

deception by Bush over Iraq might rise to the standard of an impeachable offense -- as defined by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives when it voted to impeach Clinton.

Clinton was ultimately cleared by the US Senate after being impeached by the House.

After his appearance in New Hampshire, Graham issued a statement saying he was not calling for Bush's impeachment and saw the issue as a largely academic one, adding that if Bush had misled the American public he would pay the price for it in the 2004 presidential election.

British weapons adviser goes missing

AP, London

A Ministry of Defence adviser, named by the government as the possible source for a disputed news report on Iraqi arms, has been reported missing by his family, police said Friday.

Police searching for David Kelly said Friday they have found a male body about 5 miles from his home in Oxfordshire, central England. But detectives have not yet identified the body, a spokeswoman for Thames Valley Police.

Kelly's family reported him missing late Thursday after he failed to return to home from an afternoon walk.

The government, which denies the claims, has asked the BBC to say whether Kelly was the unidentified official cited in the story, but the network has refused.

The BBC report fueled a political storm over the handling of weapons intelligence by Prime Minister Tony Blair's office, helping prompt top Parliamentary probes into the issue.

BJP meets to adopt Ayodhya resolution

PTI, Raipur

The BJP resolution on the Ayodhya issue, to be adopted at its National Executive meeting, which began here on Friday, is expected to strike a delicate balance between mollifying a restive BJP and keeping its secular NDA allies in good humour.

The resolution, apparently being brought under pressure from the party's Sangh Parivar associates, was expected to reaffirm BJP's commitment to the construction of Ram Temple at the disputed site, party sources said.

However, with a view not to offend the sensitivity of its coalition partners, the resolution is likely to express its helplessness to introduce a bill in the absence of adequate numbers in Parliament.

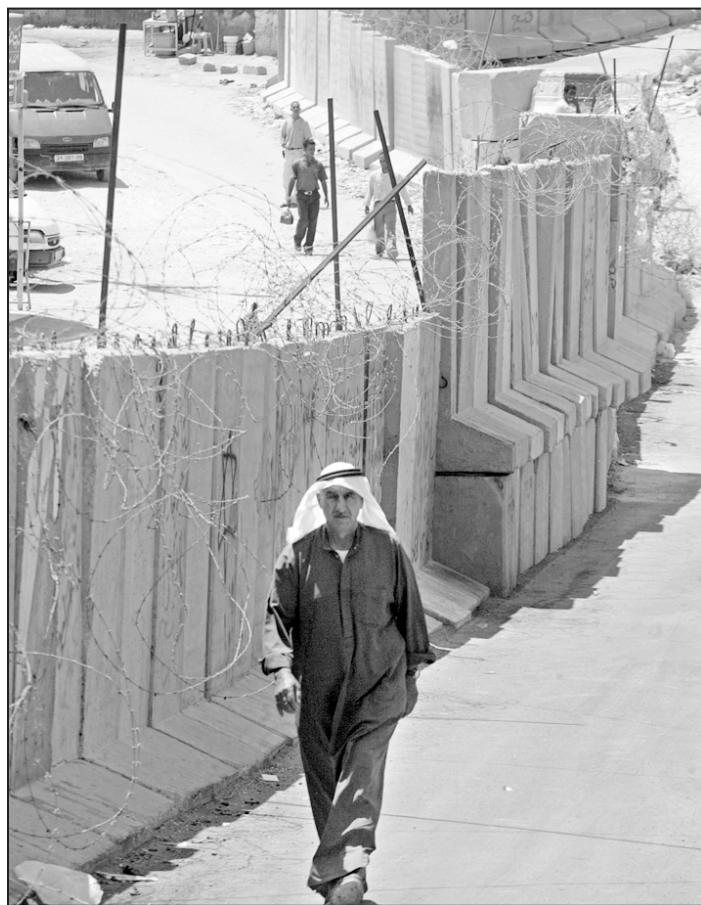
The decision not to make any major shift in its stand also stems

from a realisation that the Ayodhya issue would have little impact on the coming Assembly elections in five states.

The resolution would emphasise on resolving the issue through negotiations in a cordial atmosphere besides stressing on expediting the judicial process, the sources said.

"There would be nothing in the resolution that would offend our NDA allies," BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan said.

The resolution, drafted by Mahajan and another general secretary Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, would be the first after the 1989 Palampur one where the party decided to jump headlong into the Ram Janambhoomi movement leading to L K Advani's Rath Yatra, which saw the party being catapulted to power.



A Palestinian man walks next to the concrete wall separating the West Bank village of Abu Dis from Jerusalem Friday. A few weeks ago US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice criticized Israel for the building of a fence separating Israeli-controlled territory from the West Bank. Rice said that the fence was an attempt to establish a political border while Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon responded that the fence is a non-negotiable security necessity for Israel.

UN offices in Pakistan attacked

PTI, Islamabad

Two unknown attackers hurled hand grenades at the offices of the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the northern Pakistani town of Chilas, badly damaging the offices, police said.

A watchman of the UNDP was hurt in the attack carried out on Wednesday, while a vehicle belonging to the IFAD was badly damaged, police said. The attack also shattered the window panes of the IFAD building.

Personnel of the paramilitary Frontier Constabulary opened fire on the attackers but they fled the scene, police said. They said at least 10 hand grenades were thrown at the IFAD building but only two of them went off.

Police have detained 20 suspects in connection with the attack. This was the seventh such attack on IFAD and UNDP offices in various parts of Diamer district.

Right from the start, IFAD and UNDP offices have failed to gain acceptability among the local people who are very conservative in their traditions and religious beliefs, an official of the Northern Areas administration said.

China pushes for North Korea-US talks

AP, Beijing

China has dispatched a top diplomat to Washington to push for talks between the United States and North Korea over the North's suspected nuclear weapons program.

Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo, Beijing's most experienced envoy on the North, is expected to brief US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday about his recent visit to Pyongyang.

Dai's trip is the latest in a flurry of diplomacy by China aimed at calming tensions over the North's nuclear program, which the United States believes is aimed at producing nuclear weapons.

China is pressing for another round of talks between Washington and Pyongyang similar to those Beijing hosted in April.

North Korea has demanded one-on-one discussions with the United States, saying the nuclear issue is between it and Washington. The United States says the issue is a regional one, and wants to include China, Russia, Japan and South Korea in discussions.

A South Korean official said Friday that he is optimistic that countries involved in the dispute were moving toward multilateral talks on the crisis.

"We see various ideas floating, but the broad picture is that we are moving toward multilateral talks and we are optimistic," said Wie Sung-rak, head of the North

America bureau of the South Korean Foreign Ministry.

Wie said South Korea was briefed on Dai's visit to Pyongyang but refused to divulge details. South Korean news reports say China is pushing for new three-way talks involving North Korea, the United States and China, which would later be joined by South Korea and Japan.

Beijing, North Korea's last major ally, has repeatedly said it doesn't want nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and wants the issue resolved peacefully through negotiations.

China's diplomatic urgency may be fed by concerns that Pyongyang is pushing the issue to the brink of conflict.

The Wall Street Journal reported Friday that Chinese intelligence officials believe the North has reprocessed enough plutonium to produce a nuclear bomb and has the parts for a missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

The Journal, citing unidentified diplomats who it said were briefed by Chinese officials, said Chinese reports estimate North Korea has the means to make at least one nuclear device.

China's Foreign Ministry hasn't commented on the report.

Chinese state media said Dai met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang last weekend, underscoring China's unique role as intermediary between the hard-line communist regime and the United States.



Nelson Mandela cuts his one of his 85th birthday cakes with the help of his wife Graca Machal on Friday. The others will be given to disabled children from the Ikwazilukusa children's home, which is part of the Nelson Mandela Children Fund.

Fiji court rules Indian MPs be included in govt

REUTERS, Suva

Fiji's indigenous government must be reshaped to include ethnic Indian MPs from ousted leader Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party, the racially divided South Pacific nation's Supreme Court ruled on Friday.

Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, who has ruled out holding snap elections, said he would abide by the unanimous ruling of five Supreme Court judges that he must offer Labour MPs cabinet posts. Chaudhry said he expected a phone call from Qarase soon.

"It is a question now of whether leaders are prepared to swallow their ego and work in the national interest, or much less persist with their own agendas," Chaudhry told reporters.

There was no immediate public reaction after the decision, which was delivered amid tight security in the capital Suva. Police appealed for the calm to continue.

"The security forces are pleading with the general public to receive the decision calmly. Let the courts and the politicians do their job," Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes said.