

'I can go out with a bang if you like': Mahathir

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Journalists in Malaysia, soon to be bereft of a prime minister who made news almost every time he opened his mouth, were apparently disappointed by Mahathir Mohamad's last parliamentary appearance yesterday.

At a news conference afterwards, he was asked why his performance had been so "quiet".

Always willing to oblige, Mahathir replied: "You can make it loud. I can go out with a bang if you want. I can say nasty things. Ask me a nasty question, I will give you a nasty answer."

Nobody did, presumably having had enough of the international uproar over his recent criticism of Jews.

Instead, the man who has ruled Malaysia for the past 22 years was asked what advice he had for reporters ahead of his retirement Friday.

"Report the truth even if it is bad. Don't be a spin doctor, don't distort news, don't have your own agenda."

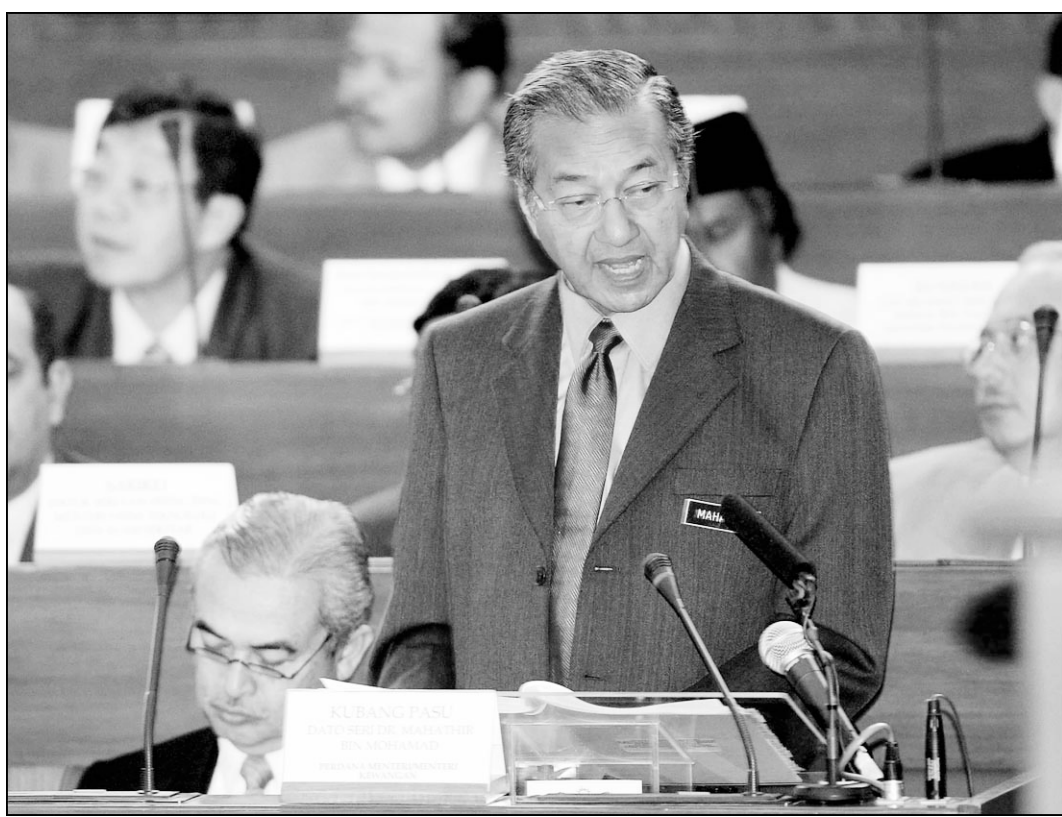


PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad delivers his last address at the parliament house in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Mahathir defended his democratic record and predicted a strong economic growth in an upbeat final parliamentary appearance prior to his retirement today.

Mahathir defends his democratic record

MPs say goodbye to Malaysian PM

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad defended his democratic record and predicted strong economic growth in an upbeat final parliamentary appearance yesterday on the eve of retirement.

Facing opposition questioning for the last time after 22 years in power, Mahathir warned that too much freedom could lead to anarchy in Malaysia's multiracial society and made a strong call for national unity.

"As I retire from the nation's highest elected office, I call upon every Malaysian to rise to the occasion to face the challenges as they emerge and shoulder the responsibilities of citizenship," he said.

"If we do this, there is no reason

why we cannot continue to be successful and make this country a model for the world to emulate."

Groups of schoolchildren crowded the public gallery and Mahathir was praised lavishly by some MPs, but the session was free of the tears and emotion which have marked a series of farewells, with normal parliamentary banter the order of the day.

Mahathir presented a mid-term review of the 8th Malaysia Plan, which ends in 2005, predicting real GDP growth at an average of six percent per year, which he said would put the country on track to realising its target of becoming a developed nation by 2020.

Before that, however, Asia's

longest-serving elected leader faced a question and answer session in which opposition MPs probed his commitment to democracy.

Mahathir defended controls such as the detention without trial of terrorism suspects and the banning of communists from elections as essential to maintaining democracy.

While the government believed in free speech, he said, it also had to ensure that racial sentiments in Malaysia's multicultural society were not inflamed.

He described national unity as the country's greatest asset. Malaysia has a Malay Muslim majority of around 60 percent of its 24 million people, but large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

"We have seen how many other multi-ethnic societies have failed because each race places its own interest first before the interest of the nation. If we are not careful we too will fail and be destroyed," he said.

"Anarchy can take place because of an obsession with democratic freedoms. The belief that if democracy is implemented then everything will be well has no basis, especially if democracy is imposed immediately."

Mahathir pointed out that it had taken Western countries nearly 200 years to reach their current level of liberal democracy, but they were still not free of problems such as political corruption and the manipulation of power.

Indonesia nets one of most wanted men of SE Asia

REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesian police have arrested one of the most wanted men in Southeast Asia, a key suspect in the August 5 bombing of the US-run Marriott hotel in Jakarta, a senior officer said yesterday.

The man, identified only as Tohir, was among two people arrested on Wednesday, national police chief General Da'i Bachtiar told reporters. He had previously said Tohir was among Southeast Asia's top five most wanted militants.

"We have detained two people, Tohir and Ismail," Bachtiar told reporters. He added that Tohir was one of those who was ready to be part of a suicide squad to attack the Marriott hotel.

Earlier, the official news agency Antara reported the arrest was made at a hotel in Indonesia's West Java town of Cirebon. It said police had also seized bomb materials from the suspects.

India rejects UN monitors for Kashmir bus service

AFP, New Delhi

India has rejected as "meaningless" a proposal by Pakistan that the United Nations monitor a proposed bus service across the disputed border between the arch-rivals in restive Kashmir, a report said.

"What is the UN going to do on the roads which are meant for the common people. What have they got to do there? It is meaningless," the Press Trust of India news agency late Wednesday quoted Defence Minister George Fernandes as saying.

Fernandes was reacting to a statement by Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar Wednesday that he welcomed a proposal by India to connect the Indian and Pakistani zones of Kashmir by bus.

Khokhar, however, said the movement of people between the two zones in the disputed territory should be "controlled" by the UN and that UN personnel should man

check-points on the disputed border. He also said people travelling on the bus should carry UN documents.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan but claimed in full by both. The two countries have fought two of their three wars over the region and came close to another conflict last year.

Tensions between the two nuclear rivals were high last year after an attack on India's parliament complex in December 2001 claimed 15 lives.

India blamed the attack on a Pakistan backed militant group battling New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir and massed troops on its borders, a step matched by Pakistan.

The two countries started a process of normalisation after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a symbolic hand of friendship to Pakistan during a visit to disputed Kashmir in April.

Khokhar's remarks were in response to proposals put forward by India last week.

These included reviving severed sporting links, upgrading travel ties, increasing humanitarian aid, introducing a ferry service between the Indian city of Bombay and the Pakistan port of Karachi and free medical treatment for Pakistani children in Indian hospitals.

On Wednesday Pakistan also agreed to resume talks on airlinks severed after the December 2001 attack on India's parliament, blamed by New Delhi on Pakistan-backed Kashmiri separatists.

Khokhar however urged New Delhi to resume talks to ease tensions over Kashmir.

India says it would not resume direct dialogue with Pakistan until "cross-border terrorism" -- it's term for the insurgency in the region that has claimed at least 39,500 lives in the past 14 years -- ended.

'India, China committed to friendly relations'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, who soured relations with China five years ago by calling it the top threat, said yesterday that Beijing wanted a friendly relationship with New Delhi.

"China wants to be friends with India and I believe that if someone wants to be friendly with us, we should stretch our hand," Fernandes told the BBC's HardTalk programme, according to excerpts released by the Press Trust of India news agency.

Fernandes had in 1998 called China the "potential enemy number one" when justifying India's surprise move to test nuclear weapons.

In the interview, Fernandes denied he was changing his stance.

"There is no question of changing one's mind. Where a nation's security is concerned there are situations and one deals with the situations," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Leaders and activists of Pakistani opposition parties shout anti-government slogans during a demonstration in front of the parliament house in Islamabad yesterday protesting the detention of the president of the multi-party Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) Makhdoom Javed Hashmi. Pakistani police, late Wednesday detained the top opposition leader after he publicly criticised the country's powerful army generals for meddling in politics.

US helps Taiwan improve its defence against China

REUTERS, Washington

US military representatives are currently involved in dozens of programmes in Taiwan aimed at improving the island's ability to guard against China, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

US officers are advising Taiwan's military at all levels in what US and Taiwanese officials acknowledged is a major departure from long-standing US policy limiting military relations with Taiwan to avoid a confrontation with China, the newspaper reported.

The US military is involved in both classroom seminars and training in the field and the two militaries have established a communications hotline for emergencies, the newspaper said, citing a US official and a senior Taiwanese diplomat.

The Washington Post, citing US officials, also reported that hundreds of Taiwanese military personnel are being trained and educated in the United States.

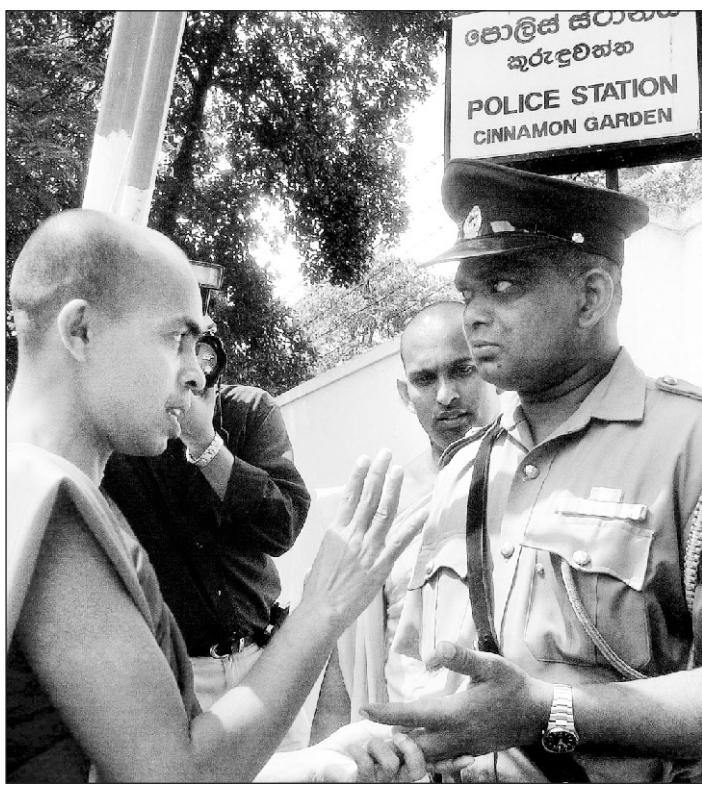


PHOTO: AFP

A Buddhist monk (L) talks to a policeman (R) in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo yesterday demanding the release of five nationalists arrested in connection with a recent attack on a cultural show depicting unity among Sri Lanka's minority Tamils and majority Sinhalese. The nationalists are accused of storming the show Wednesday at the Sri Lankan capital's New Town Hall and injuring at least seven people.

EU-China agree on growing importance of strategic ties

AFP, Beijing

Chinese and European leaders acknowledged the growing strategic importance of Sino-EU ties and agreed to pursue greater economic cooperation at their annual summit here.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who currently holds the rotating European Union presidency, heads the EU team and is chairing the one-day meeting alongside Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

"It is fair to say that Sino-EU relations, as they have developed up 'til this point, are increasingly mature and strategic in nature," said Wen as he greeted Berlusconi, European Commission President Romano Prodi and EU Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana.

"Our talks are focusing on how to strengthen the friendly cooperative relations between China and the EU."

The sixth annual summit is discussing a broad sweep of issues from boosting trade to discussing human rights and tackling the North Korean nuclear crisis.

"I'm very happy to be able to visit this very important country," said Berlusconi, who heaped praise on China's booming economy, and "its role as a pillar of stability in the region and a protagonist of stability in the world".

"China's and the EU's economic cooperation is developing very well," he added.

"It has developed fast in the past few years. But I believe we can still do much in this area."

Economics figure high on the list of EU priorities, as many of Europe's ailing economies are hoping for a boost from increasingly prosperous China.

EU trade commissioner Pascal Lamy, who arrived with Prodi, was co-chairing with his Chinese counterpart the annual meeting of the EU-China joint committee on economic dialogue.

The 15-country EU -- set to expand to 25 members next year -- will also ink a number of key accords in Beijing, reflecting areas of common interest and concern, Wen said.

Significantly, China and Europe are to sign a 200 million euro (230

million dollars) deal to allow China to join the EU's Galileo satellite navigation system, which could rival the US-developed GPS system.

While Europe is a veteran in space research, China is suddenly being taken more seriously as an emerging space power since it sent a man into space earlier this month.

The two sides will also pen an "authorized destination status" agreement to simplify visa procedures for Chinese tour groups to Europe, while setting up a mechanism for repatriating illegal immigrants.

Finally, an EU-China industrial dialogue agreement will focus on the auto sector, which has been the object of considerable controversy since China issued the draft of a new industrial policy widely seen as over protectionist.

The thrust of the EU position is to press Beijing to fulfil commitments made when it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, officials said, with its failure to do so fuelling some concern among foreign businesses.

Pak opposition leader charged with attempt to incite army mutiny

AFP, Islamabad

A top Pakistani opposition leader arrested overnight has been charged with inciting mutiny in the armed forces, an offence punishable with life imprisonment, officials said yesterday.

Makhdoom Javed Hashmi, president of multi-party Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), was taken into custody in connection with a letter purported to be from an unknown military man that he circulated at a news conference here last week.

The opposition leader in the letter "has tried to support India vis-a-vis Pakistan army, has maligned Pakistan army personnel and attempted to incite them for mutiny," the Islamabad district magistrate said in a press statement.

Hours before his arrest Hashmi harangued army generals at a news conference where he showed some unsigned letters he said he had received from military men about the sagging image of the army.

The arrest triggered strong protests and condemnation from

opposition legislators who said the action was politically motivated and meant to deter the opposition campaign against President Pervez Musharraf in the parliament.

Around 50 lawmakers from opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Hashmi's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) religious alliance met with National Assembly speaker Chaudhry Ameer Hussain to demand that he order the police to let Hashmi attend the session of the lower house of the parliament on Friday.

Hashmi was elected earlier this month to lead the ARD which is spearheading a drive by the major opposition parties to campaign against the sweeping powers and extended leadership General Musharraf awarded himself by constitutional amendment.

PML-N spokesman Siddique Farooq said Hashmi's arrest demonstrated the hollowness of Musharraf's claim that democracy was functioning in the country under civilian government headed by Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali.

Malaysia inks \$75m helicopter deal with Agusta

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has signed a deal with Agusta SpA of Italy to buy 11 Agusta A109 light reconnaissance helicopters worth 286 million ringgit (75 million dollars) for the army's air wing, local media reported Thursday.

"We have waited a long time for this," Defence Minister Najib Razak was quoted as saying by the New Straits Times.

"We found that the Agusta is well-suited for our needs in terms of its range, the altitude it can reach and its hovering abilities," Najib said.

The helicopters, equipped with 70 millimetre rockets and 20 millimetre machine guns, are expected to be delivered from December 2005.

When the idea of an army air wing was first mooted the focus was on procuring attack helicopters, with previous contenders for the contract being Boeing's Apache attack helicopter and the South African Rooivalk by Denel.

North Korea says crisis becoming 'unpredictable'

REUTERS, Beijing

North Korea told China its nuclear standoff with the United States was approaching an "unpredictably difficult phase" as Japanese media reported the isolated communist state may be softening its stand on talks.

North Korean parliament chief Kim Yong-nam made the remarks when he met Wu Bangguo, China's parliament leader and second behind President Hu Jintao in the Communist Party hierarchy, on Wednesday, the opening day of a goodwill visit to Pyongyang.

Kim "pointed out that the situation in Northeast Asia centering around the Korean peninsula is reaching an unpredictably difficult phase due to the US invariable hostile policy" toward North Korea, the North's KCNA news agency said.

Wu, the most senior leader from China to visit its impoverished and isolated neighbor since former President Jiang Zemin in late 2001,

for his part urged improved relations on the Korean peninsula.

"He said that the Chinese side supports the improvement of the relations between the north and the south of the Korean peninsula and the realization of its independent and peaceful reunification," KCNA said.

Japanese media reports said on Thursday North Korea was no longer demanding a non-aggression treaty with the United States and would settle instead for a letter of assurance on its security from President Bush.

Bush this month said the United States and its partners were all willing to sign a document, not a treaty, declaring "We won't attack you" so long as North Korea agreed to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

North Korea initially dismissed the proposal as "laughable" but said later it was prepared to consider it.

But illustrating the tension on the peninsula, South Korea's navy fired warning shots on Thursday after a North Korean patrol boat briefly crossed a disputed maritime border while watching Chinese fishing vessels, the South's

military said. With North Korea seemingly edging toward talks, any military action is closely watched.

Wu's visit has raised hopes Beijing can persuade Pyongyang to attend a new round of six-party talks on the crisis.

China hosted an inconclusive round of talks in late August with North Korea, the United States, South Korea, Japan and Russia to try to end the standoff.

The crisis erupted a year ago when the United States, which has branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iran and pre-war Iraq, said Pyongyang had admitted to having a covert nuclear program.

The official Xinhua news agency said Wu told Kim China would continue providing assistance, within its capacity, to North Korea, and would encourage Chinese enterprises to cooperate with the North.

China, one of the North's few friends, provides more than two-thirds of its food and fuel aid.

S Korean navy fires warning shots at North's patrol boat

AFP, Seoul

A South Korean navy ship yesterday fired warning shots at a North Korean patrol boat which crossed into the southern territorial waters in the Yellow Sea, military authorities said.

The patrol boat returned to North Korea after 10 minutes in the South Korean waters, and no injuries occurred, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) office said.

The North's vessel crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) maritime border some half a mile into waters off the South Korea-controlled Yeonpyeong Island at 11:37am (0237 GMT), the JCS said.

A 1,200-ton South Korean navy ship issued warning broadcasts urging the North Korean boat to return before firing four rounds of 76 millimeter (3.04 inch) warning gun shots to drive it away, the JCS said.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Prince Charles (C) speaks to Miss Tibet 2003 Tsering Kyi (L) and Miss India International Sonali Nagrani (R) during a function in the Tibetan Locality of New Delhi on Wednesday. The first of his nine days in India ended on a mellow but politically poignant note when the prince drove down to Majnu Ka Tilla, or Lover's Hill, on New Delhi's outskirts at the invitation of Tibetan exiles who live in the area.

Afghan opium production spreading like cancer: UN

REUTERS, Vienna

Opium cultivation is spreading like a cancer in Afghanistan and risks transforming the world's leading supplier into a state of narcotics terrorists and drug cartels, a UN survey said Wednesday.

Opium poppy cultivation is fanning out to areas it has never been seen in before, the Vienna-based UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in its Afghanistan Opium survey for 2003 -- the first conducted in cooperation with the national government.

High prices for opium have lured poor farmers away from conventional farming, spreading poppy cultivation to 28 of Afghanistan's 32 provinces from 18 provinces four years ago. "Either major surgical drug-control measures are taken now or the drug cancer in Afghanistan will keep spreading and metastasize into corruption, violence and terrorism," said UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa.