

South Korea to send 3,000 troops to Iraq

PTI, Seoul

South Korea finalised plans on Wednesday to send 3,000 troops to Iraq, a top government official said.

The troops, who will work on peacekeeping and reconstruction, will join some 460 South Korean medics and military engineers already operating in the volatile nation.

President Roh Moo-hyun met with security-related Cabinet ministers early on Wednesday and approved the plan, National Security Adviser Ra Jong-il said.

No decision has been made on where to deploy the troops, Ra said, and the dispatch would take at least four months.

"We plan to decide on the region after working-level consultation with the United States, and after considering the situation in (Iraq)," Ra told reporters.

The deployment is subject to parliamentary approval, and is expected to be passed.

Seven military experts were leaving on Wednesday for a six-day visit to the United States to discuss the plan with Washington.

Roh has vowed to push the deployment despite last month's shooting deaths of two South Korean workers by unidentified gunmen on a road near Tikrit, north of Baghdad.



Several hundred armed demonstrators and local residents take to the streets of the town of Fallujah, 50 kms west of Baghdad, December 16, 2003, chanting pro-Saddam slogans and letting off celebratory gunfire into the air, pledging their allegiance to their deposed leader, and chanting, "We will sacrifice ourselves to you Saddam, with our blood, with our soul".

Israel likely to bar Arafat from Bethlehem mass

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat expressed hope on Tuesday that he could make a Christmas visit to Bethlehem for the first time in three years, but Israel said it was unlikely to let him go.

Asked by reporters at his battered headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah whether he wanted to travel to the city of Jesus' birth for holiday festivities, Arafat replied: "I hope so. You know that I never missed this opportunity until they (Israel) imposed a siege on this compound."

A senior Israeli official told Reuters the government saw no reason to change a policy under which Arafat is allowed to leave his headquarters but is not guaranteed he can return.

The edict has effectively confined him for nearly two years, following a series of Palestinian suicide bombings.

"He will stay where he is," the Israeli official said, adding that "there is no reason" to change Israel's policy toward Arafat. Israel accuses Arafat of fomenting violence in a three-year uprising, a charge which he denies.

Iraq debt relief Germany, France and US finally agree

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany, France and the United States said on Tuesday they were prepared to offer substantial debt relief to Iraq after a visit to the two main opponents of the war in Iraq by US special envoy James Baker.

"Debt reduction is critical if the Iraqi people are to have any chance to build a free and prosperous Iraq," President Bush, French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said in a joint statement.

"Therefore, France, Germany and the United States agree that there should be substantial debt reduction for Iraq in the Paris Club in 2004, and will work closely with each other and with other countries to achieve this objective."

The size of reduction in Iraq's \$120 billion in debt will be agreed later.

Baker is on a European trip to win support for a debt relief deal and to ease a transatlantic row over contracts to rebuild Iraq.

In Washington, White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Bush had spoken to Baker about his meetings with Chirac and Schroeder.

"We appreciate the commitments they made on the need to restructure and reduce the debt burden," he said.

Washington has barred opponents of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, including France and Germany, from bidding for contracts worth about \$18.6 billion.

The International Monetary Fund puts Iraq's debts at about \$120 billion, of which about \$40 billion is debt and arrears to the 19 countries in the Paris Club.

Two days after the capture of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, it appeared a good start for Baker on a trip which also includes meetings in Russia, another war opponent which stands to miss out on the reconstruction contracts.

However, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said there would have to be a transfer of power to a sovereign Iraqi government before a debt

deal could be signed, and that all should be included in reconstruction.

US officials said Baker wanted to put across the message that France, Germany and Russia still have an opportunity to secure lucrative sub-contracts and the White House said it did not want to close off discussion of the issue.

"We welcome the opportunity to discuss our decision with others if they want to talk about that. The president has made it very clear that those lines of communication would be open," McClellan said.

Baker also faces questions over Washington's Iraq policies, despite efforts to rebuild relations damaged by the war. France, for example, wants a bigger role for the United Nations in Iraq.

Officials said in private that countries such as Germany and Japan were less keen than others about adding a heavy dose of flexibility to strict Paris Club rules on debt relief.

Assad won't comment on Saddam capture

AFP, Athens

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad refused to comment Tuesday on the capture of Iraq's deposed leader Saddam Hussein, saying it did not interest his country.

"The capture doesn't concern us," Assad said in a joint press conference with Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis, when asked to comment on Saddam's arrest by US soldiers Saturday.

"There is no official Syrian answer to this question," Assad said.

On Sunday, Syria's Information Minister Ahmad al-Hassan brushed off the capture of the ousted dictator, saying it only wanted to see the end of the US-led occupation of this country.

"Syria's position on Iraq is not based on the fate of individuals," the state news agency Sana quoted him as saying.

"We want an Iraq that preserves its territorial integrity, its unity and its sovereignty," Hassan said.

Assad is on an official three-day visit to Athens ending Wednesday.

The Syrian leader also said he was optimistic for an end to friction with Washington over US sanctions against Syria.

Taiwan announces new SARS case

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan health authorities said yesterday a man working at a military medical research institute had contracted SARS, the island's first case of the killer respiratory disease in five months.

The 44-year-old man caught the virus in a laboratory on December 5 while conducting an experiment on SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), the disease that ravaged Asia this year causing hundreds of deaths.

"The victim is a researcher engaging in a government-funded research project on SARS, who was infected with the virus accidentally during the experiment," said Department of Health Minister Chen Chien-jen.

"Only one person has been infected so far," he told a press conference.

The patient, a lieutenant-colonel working at the Institute of Preventive Medicine of National Defense Medical Center, developed fever following a December 7-10 trip to Singapore, where he attended a medical seminar.

Center for Disease Control Director Su Ih-jen said the man tested positive Wednesday. He was being treated at the SARS-designated Hoping Municipal Hospital and was not suffering from respiratory difficulties, doctors said.

The patient's wife and two children and those who had contact with him would be observed for 21 days until December 31 to watch for signs of fever, an early symptom of the disease, which claimed 37 lives in Taiwan.

Chen meanwhile urged the public to step up personal hygiene and other preventive measures but said there was no cause for panic, describing the positive test as an isolated case.

The case is the first on the island since the World Health Organisation (WHO) on July 5 declared the epidemic had been contained worldwide after announcing Taiwan -- the last region on a blacklist -- SARS-free.

WHO's Western Pacific regional office spokesman Peter Cordingley in Manila declined to make an immediate comment. "We are still waiting for more information," he told AFP.

Singapore authorities said they had launched an investigation into the case, stressing the city-state was SARS-free.

"We are establishing the facts of the case but there are no suspect (cases) of SARS in Singapore," a health ministry spokeswoman told AFP.

She said authorities were trying to find out who came into contact with the Taiwanese man. Singapore, which suffered 33 fatalities during the worldwide outbreak earlier this year, last reported a SARS case in September.

The WHO had previously warned Asian nations to take steps against a possible recurrence of the virus, which experts fear could return in cooler winter months across the region.

The pneumonia-like disease broke out in China's southern Guangdong province in November last year and later spread to and caused mass outbreaks in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Vietnam.



A man wearing a mask puts on plastic gloves on the streets of Hong Kong as authorities here raised the first stage of a three-level SARS alert system following a confirmed case in Taiwan yesterday.

Greek militants jailed for life

AFP, Athens

An Athens court yesterday sentenced six members of Greek extremist group November 17, including its two top men, to life imprisonment for 19 murders since 1983. A further nine members of the group were sentenced to jail but the length of their terms has yet to be fixed.

November 17 is named after a student uprising against Greece's then military junta in 1973. It made its first appearance in 1975, the year after the junta fell, when it assassinated CIA station chief Richard Welch.

The group is accused of carrying out 23 murders and dozens of bomb and rocket attacks, all of them in or

around Athens, in the last three decades. Its members cannot be prosecuted for the four murders the group committed before 1983 because Greece has a 20-year statute of limitations.

The court sentenced November 17 leader Alexandros Yiotopoulos, 59, to 21 life terms for instigating the 19 murders for which the group has claimed responsibility since 1983. They include the killing of four US officials and British defence attaché Stephen Saunders.

Dimitris Koufontinas, 45, the group's chief of operations, was sentenced to 13 life terms for carrying out as many assassinations, including the murder of Saunders in 2000.

MTV launches campaign for Suu Kyi's release

PTI, Singapore

Music television channel MTV has launched a campaign for the release of detained Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi -- but viewers in Asia aren't likely to see it.

MTV hopes the publicity blitz will raise the profile of Suu Kyi's struggle against Myanmar's ruling military junta to the level of Nelson Mandela's 1980s battle against apartheid, MTV Networks Europe said in a statement.

The campaign uses an ad produced in Europe -- and intended for all of MTV's 42 channels worldwide -- said the statement from the channel's European headquarters.

MTV Asia's statement said it would review the ad next year, along with other European content, and consider it for future use.

EU, US agree to share air passenger details

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Union and the United States have clinched a deal on how to share data of passengers traveling across the Atlantic to help with the global fight against terrorism, EU and US officials said.

The European Commission said Tuesday it was ready to hand over data about airline passengers with the United States after Washington offered "adequate" privacy safeguards.

The decision ends months of tense talks as the European Union had reacted angrily to initial US demands, saying they would breach

the privacy rights of its citizens.

"There was pain on both sides, but we have come up with a very solid middle ground," said Stewart Verdery, assistant secretary for border and transportation policy in the Department of Homeland Security.

European Commission spokesman Jonathan Todd said the European Union executive would soon adopt a decision to allow the transfer of data to the United States under the agreed framework.

The decision by the Commission is subject to an opinion from the European Parliament. The EU assembly had earlier said the US

request was against EU privacy rules and asked the EU executive to find a solution by year-end.

"I think that today marks a real dawning of an era ... of mutual recognition and mutual respect for data protection and privacy framework on both sides of the Atlantic," said Nuala O'Connor Kelly, chief privacy officer for the Department of Homeland Security.

The United States has demanded access to foreign airlines' booking records in a bid to gather useful information to prevent acts such as the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.



Delhi's Congress Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit (R) offers flowers to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at Parliament house in New Delhi yesterday. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wrested control from the opposition Congress in three of four states that voted December 1 while the Congress party retained its power in Indian capital Delhi.

Cyclone in south India claims 49

AFP, Hyderabad

At least 49 people died and millions of dollars worth of crop damaged when a cyclone ripped through rice-growing villages on India's southeastern coast, officials said yesterday.

Twenty-four people have died of illness in Andhra Pradesh state's Krishna district since the winds touching 120 kilometres (75 miles) an hour hit late Monday, district collector Prabhakar Reddy told AFP.

"Most of the victims are people above the age of 50 who were exposed to cold winds and rains following the cyclone," Reddy said.

Local officials reported 24 more deaths in the adjoining Andhra Pradesh districts of Guntur and West Godavari.

Reddy said the death toll could have been higher but that thousands of villagers were taken to safe locations before the cyclone, which collapsed homes and uprooted trees.

Jackson to be charged today or tomorrow

AFP, Los Angeles

Superstar Michael Jackson will be formally charged with child molestation on Thursday or Friday, nearly a month after his dramatic arrest, the chief prosecutor said Tuesday.

The long-awaited charges against the "King of Pop," who turned himself in to police on November 20 on "multiple counts" of sex abuse on a child under 14, will be filed in the California town of Santa Maria, near his Neverland ranch.

"Charges against Michael Jackson will be filed at Santa Barbara County Superior Court, Santa Maria Division on Thursday afternoon, December 18, or Friday morning, December 19," District Attorney Tom Sneddon said.

Sneddon, who also led an investigation into allegations that Jackson abused a 13-year-old boy in 1993, said in a statement that he would announce the exact time and date of the filing of charges on Wednesday.

Sneddon said last month that the

laying of formal charges had been delayed to set up a website to handle public and media interest in the case.

Jackson, 45, last month was handcuffed and subjected to humiliating police mugshots and fingerprinting when he returned to Santa Barbara on his private to face arrest last month.

He has strongly denied the allegations and dismissed them as a "big lie," while his lawyer suggested his young accuser's family saw the multi-millionaire star as a "lottery ticket" and was trying to cash in on his fortune.

The announcement of plans for the filing of criminal charges against one of the world's top entertainers came amid a slew of news reports that have cast doubt on the latest allegations against Jackson.

While prosecutors have declined to reveal details of the case against him, Jackson's accuser is reported to be a 12-year-old cancer patient who befriended and entertained at his expansive Neverland ranch.