

BUSH SAYS

Ties with S Asian states to boost US security

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush moved to reassure Americans yesterday that broader ties with countries like India, Pakistan and Afghanistan will strengthen US national security, despite widespread criticism of a nuclear deal he signed with New Delhi.

"By working with these leaders and the people of these three nations, we're seizing the opportunities this new century offers and helping to lay the foundations of peace and prosperity for generations to come," the president said in his weekly radio address.

He said the nuclear agreement he had reached with India will bring

India's civilian nuclear programmes under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The deal signed by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday paves the way for the lifting of three-decade-old US restrictions on sharing civilian nuclear technology.

In exchange, India agreed to place its civilian atomic reactors under global scrutiny.

The deal, however, was met with sharp criticism in the US Congress. Democratic Representative Edward Markey, co-chairman of the Bipartisan Task Force on Nonproliferation, said the agreement undercuts the very

foundation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

"It empowers the hawks in every rogue nation to put their nuclear weapons plans on steroids now that they can no longer be isolated as non-signers of an agreement that has been shredded," Markey said in a statement.

But Bush insisted the deal was "good for American security because it will bring India's civilian nuclear programme into the international nonproliferation mainstream."

"The agreement also is good for the American economy," the president continued. "The agreement will help meet India's surging energy needs, and that will lessen India's growing demand for other energy

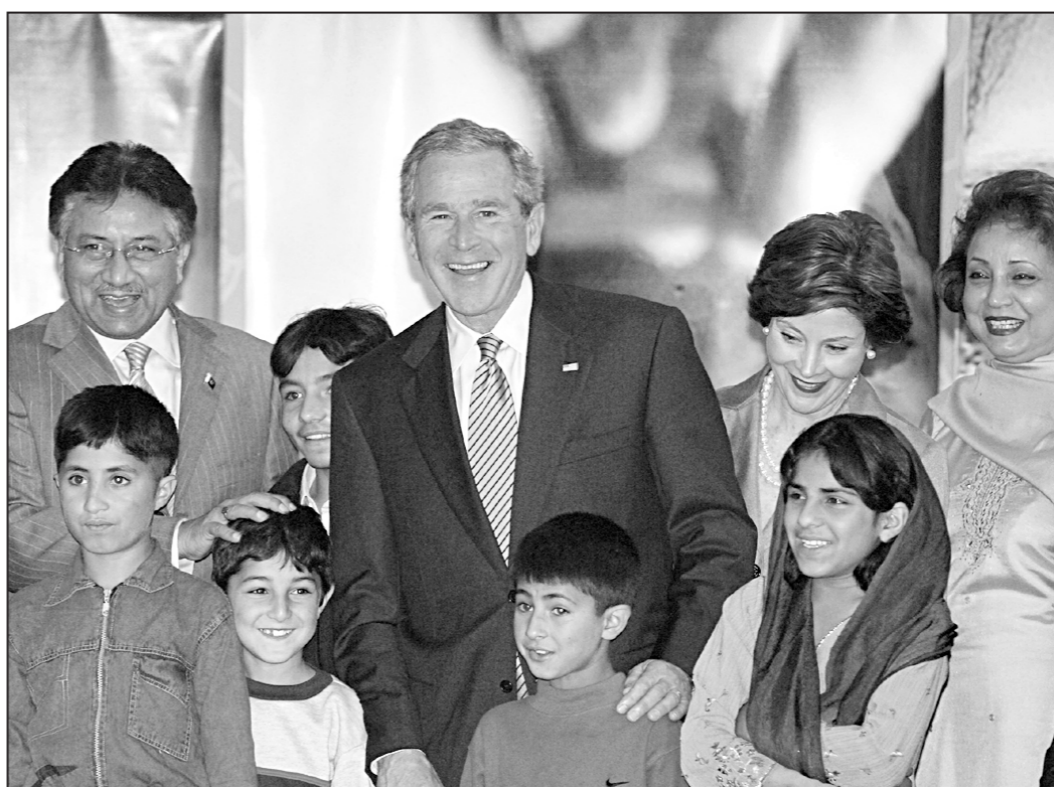
supplies and help restrain energy prices for American consumers."

The president also highlighted the importance of trade with India, which he described as a rapidly expanding market for US products.

He noted that Air India had recently ordered 68 planes from Boeing Company and US exports to India grew last year by more than 30 percent.

"And all this trade is creating jobs and opportunity in America," Bush said.

He added that in his talks with Prime Minister Singh, he made it clear that trade between the two countries "must be free and fair."



US President George W. Bush (C), Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf (L), US First Lady Laura Bush (3R), and Musharraf's wife Sahaba (R), pose with children left orphaned by the Pakistan earthquake at the Presidential Palace in Islamabad yesterday.

UK minister Jowell splits from husband amid 'bribe' scandal

AFP, London

British Culture Minister Tessa Jowell and her husband David Mills, who is mired in allegations of having taken a bribe from Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi, have decided to separate, Mills's lawyer announced yesterday.

The announcement was made in a faxed statement to Britain's Press Association by solicitor David Kirk.

"This whole business has imposed a dreadful strain on my client and his marriage," Kirk said in a statement.

"He fully accepts responsibility for these pressures and for the situation into which he put his wife, who he knows is entirely blameless in all of this."

Jowell was angry and embarrassed by the allegations surrounding her husband of 27 years, who is "mortified" by the situation, the lawyer added.



Pakistani policemen arrest anti-Bush protesters in Rawalpindi yesterday. President George W. Bush, on the final leg of a landmark visit to South Asia, praised Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf for his commitment to the war on terror but said more work was needed to defeat al-Qaeda.

Detentions mount in Pakistan to stifle anti-Bush protests

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities held leading opposition politicians, including hundreds of Islamists, in detention on Saturday to stop them protesting against US President George W. Bush's visit to the country.

The leader of the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) Islamist alliance, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, was detained at his home in Lahore a few days ago, the second time he has been detained within two weeks.

On Saturday police detained up to 350 of the Islamist parties' local-level leaders in towns dotted around the country to prevent them organising rallies, Liaqat Baluch, an MMA member of the National Assembly, told Reuters.

Baluch said he expected a protest in the eastern city of Lahore to go ahead despite the detentions.

Police also detained former cricket hero turned politician Imran

Khan at his residence to stop him leading a demonstration in Rawalpindi, the garrison town next to the capital, Islamabad.

Khan, who retains a high profile despite his Tehrik-i-Insaaf party's meagre support, says US support for Musharraf, who came to power in a military coup in 1999, is delaying the restoration of democracy in Pakistan.

A Pashtun himself, Khan is also highly critical of the conduct of the war on terrorism by Pakistani and US forces in the Pashtun tribal lands straddling the Pakistan-Afghan border.

"We were at a dinner late last night, and when we came out we were arrested," said Khan's political secretary, Saifullah Niazi. "They took him to his house, and he's still under arrest."

Officials in Khan's party said up to 150 of their colleagues had been picked up by police.

NUCLEAR CRISIS

Door wide open for UN action against Iran

AFP, Vienna

Little seems to stand in the way of the crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions being handed over to the UN Security Council next week after last-ditch EU-Iran talks failed to reach an agreement.

The board of governors of the UN watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, meets in Vienna on Monday to consider a report on Iran's nuclear programme that could set off Security Council punitive measures.

"The report is presented to the

board and then has to go to the Security Council," IAEA spokesman Peter Rickwood said Saturday.

The IAEA's 35-nation board of governors had reported Iran on February 4 to the UN Security Council but left a month open for diplomacy before the world body decides what measures, if any, to take.

EU powers and Iran failed Friday to strike a deal in talks that could have blocked possible Security Council action over Western fears that Tehran is secretly developing atomic weapons.

"Time is running out," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said after two hours of talks in Vienna that had been requested by Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani.

The Vienna talks, which also included Britain, France and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, were held "in a constructive atmosphere, but finally we were unable to reach agreement," Steinmeier added.

NUKE DEAL LIKE INDIA

Bush stays cool to Pakistan

REUTERS, Islamabad

US President George W. Bush gave no sign yesterday that he would support granting Pakistan the same kind of nuclear agreement just reached with India.

The subject came up in private talks between Bush and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

The pact, announced on Thursday, marks a major break-

through for New Delhi, long treated as a nuclear pariah by the world, as it allows it to access American atomic technology and fuel to meet its soaring energy needs. The deal still needs approval by the US Congress.

Asked at a joint news conference if Pakistan, India's nuclear rival, would get a similar deal, Bush was ambiguous. Other US officials have said it would not happen.

Bush said he and Musharraf discussed it and "I explained that Pakistan and India are different countries with different needs and different histories" and these differences would be taken into account as the strategy moved forward.

Bush said he recognised Pakistan had growing energy needs. Asked if the United States would oppose a natural gas pipeline to Iran, Bush did not say no.

HAMAS SAYS

No lasting peace until Israel pulls out

AFP, Moscow

Hamas will not reach peace with Israel until the Jewish state withdraws from Palestinian territory it occupied in 1967, the radical movement's leader said Friday after landmark first talks with a world power.

Khaled Meshaal said that only if Israel declared its readiness to pull out of occupied land, return refugees, break down the security fence and free all prisoners, "then our side will take serious steps toward securing peace."

He made it clear he was in no rush to enter any kind of talks with Israel, which considers the group a terrorist organisation.

Meshaal's comments came after talks in Moscow with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that marked the Hamas leader's most high-profile appearance yet on the international stage.

It follows the movement's stun-

ning Palestinian election victory in January and as it prepares to form its first government despite being isolated on the international stage for refusing to recognise Israel's right to exist.

The visit was held under intense security - at Meshaal's press conference, eight bodyguards wearing black trenchcoats stood directly behind him and his Hamas colleagues.

The delegation had earlier been given the rare protection of elite Kremlin secret service personnel, a measure usually only accorded top dignitaries.

Lavrov told Hamas it had to respect the views laid down by the Middle East quartet of mediators - Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations.

"That means above all the need to stick by all existing agreements, the need to recognise the right of Israel to exist as a partner in negoti-

ations, (and) the need to reject all armed methods of settling political questions," Interfax quoted him as saying.

But Meshaal said Israel bore the blame for the Middle East impasse and had "always turned away from its responsibilities."

Asked about a truce Hamas has largely observed over the past year, he said Israel "has not stopped its aggression" and, "for that reason, we have not got a special interest or enthusiasm in that kind of ceasefire."

Nevertheless, in a statement after the talks, the Russian foreign ministry said Hamas vowed to stick to the ceasefire provided Israel also refrained from force.

"The willingness of Hamas not to withdraw from the inter-Palestinian agreement on a ceasefire reached in March 2005 was confirmed with the understanding that Israel would also refrain from use of force," it said.

US signals abandonment of nuclear disarmament

AFP, Washington

The United States has signalled its apparent abandonment of the goal of nuclear disarmament "for the foreseeable future" as it embarked on a quest for a new generation of nuclear warheads.

Although the term "nuclear disarmament" quietly disappeared from the Bush administration's vocabulary long ago, the statement by Linton Brooks, head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, marked the first time a top government official publicly acknowledged a goal enshrined in key international documents will no longer be pursued.

"The United States will, for the foreseeable future, need to retain both nuclear forces and the capabilities to sustain and modernize those forces," Brooks stated Friday as he addressed the East Tennessee Economic Council in the city of Oak Ridge, which is home to a major nuclear weapons complex.

"The end of the Cold War did not end the importance of nuclear weapons," continued the chief

steward of the US nuclear weapons program. "I do not see any chance of the political conditions for abolition arising in my lifetime, nor do I think abolition could be verified if it were negotiated."

The acknowledgement represents a departure from commitments given by previous US administrations to their negotiating partners and the international community at large.

In September 1998, then-presidents Bill Clinton of the United States and Boris Yeltsin of Russia signed a joint statement, in which they reaffirmed the two countries' commitment to "the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament".

In addition, unambiguous disarmament clauses are contained in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty signed in 1968 by all leading nuclear powers of that era, including the United States, and now used to rein in the nuclear ambitions of countries like Iran and North Korea.

"The end of the Cold War did not end the importance of nuclear weapons," continued the chief

Blair under fire for evoking God in Iraq war decision

AFP, London

Tony Blair triggered strong reactions yesterday from parents of soldiers killed in Iraq and the political opposition, after the British prime minister evoked God in his decision to go to war.

Details emerged Friday of Blair's interview on an ITV1 television talk show where he said God and history would judge his action in joining the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

"That decision has to be taken and has to be lived with, and in the end there is a judgment that - well, I think if you have faith about these things then you realise that judgment is made by other people," Blair said in the interview with host Michael Parkinson which will air Saturday night.

Pressed to clarify what he meant, Blair, a devout Christian, replied: "If you believe in God, it's made by God as well."

The words did not sit well with Rose Gentle, whose son Gordon was killed in Basra in 2004, one of the 103 British soldiers to date to have lost their lives in the Iraqi conflict.