



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani tribesmen look at destroyed houses after a military airstrike on an alleged militant hideout near Miranshah yesterday. Around 30 foreign militants and their local supporters were killed as Pakistani troops using military helicopters destroyed their hideout in a remote tribal town near the Afghan border.

US warns China could become negative force

AFP, Sydney

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has warned that China could become a "negative force" in the Asia-Pacific region and urged the US, Australia and Japan to form a common position on how to engage the Asian economic powerhouse, reports said.

Speaking to Australian journalists in Washington ahead of her visit to Sydney and Melbourne next week, Rice said that Beijing's military and economic rise would be the focus of upcoming trilateral security discussions with Australia and Japan.

Rice said the region was undergoing tremendous flux and change, mostly because of the rise of China.

"And I think all of us in the region, particularly those of us who are long-standing allies, have a joint responsibility and obligation to try and produce conditions in which the rise of China will be a positive force in international politics, not a negative force," The Weekend Australian quoted Rice as saying.

Abbas rejects Hamas govt programme

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas has rejected Hamas's proposed government programme because it does not meet his demands and those of the international community on relations with Israel, a senior Palestinian official said yesterday.

Abbas "rejected the Hamas government programme which was presented to him by prime minister-designate Ismail Haniya because the principal political points in it have to be clear for the international community," the official said, asking not be identified.

They also "have to respect the decisions of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the programme of President Abbas which is based on peace," he added.

"Negotiations are the way to peace between Israel and the Palestinians."

On February 21, Abbas formally tasked Haniya with forming the next cabinet following the radical Islamist faction's massive victory in the Palestinian general election on January 25.

Since then, Haniya has consulted with a number of factions, most notably Abbas's own Fatah, with whom it has still not been able to reach agreement on joining a Hamas-led coalition.

Abbas met with Haniya on Friday and received from him a letter spelling out Hamas's proposed programme. No details of the letter were revealed at the time, nor were they by the official speaking to AFP on Saturday.

Because of the delay in forming a government, Abbas said Friday that he was comfortable with Haniya taking two more weeks to do so.

Under the Palestinian Basic Law, Haniya has three weeks to form a

government with a 14-day extension should he require extra time to nail down a line-up and win parliamentary approval for it.

That would give Haniya until March 28 -- the same day as a scheduled general election in Israel.

The incoming Palestinian government will mark the start of an unprecedented period of cohabitation between a Palestinian Authority president from Fatah and a Hamas-dominated cabinet.

Significant political differences separate Fatah, which is committed to a negotiated solution to the Middle East conflict with Israel, and Hamas, which champions the armed struggle and refuses to recognize the Jewish state's right to exist.

Hamas trounced Fatah at the ballot box on January 25, winning 74 out of the 132 seats in parliament against just 45 for Abbas's move-

ment. The election ended Fatah's monopoly of power since the Palestinian Authority was created in 1994.

Earlier Palestinian prime minister-designate Ismail Haniya on Friday dismissed a threat by Israel's acting premier as "confusion" created by the radical Islamist group Hamas's victory in January's election.

"There is no doubt that the overall success of the Palestinian (legislative) elections and the victory of the movement (Hamas) in particular have confused the Israeli occupation," Haniya said in an interview broadcast by Dubai-based Al-Arabiya television.

Bush admits gravity of mounting Iraq unrest

US hostage found dead

AFP, Washington

A US hostage, abducted in November, has been found shot dead in Iraq as US President George W. Bush acknowledged the gravity of mounting unrest and called on Iraqi leaders to quickly form a national unity government.

The body of Tom Fox, a 54-year-old peace activist from Virginia, seized with a British and two Canadian colleagues, was found in a plastic bag on a garbage dump in west Baghdad, a witness and an interior ministry official said.

He had been shot and his body, in a track suit, had been wrapped in a blanket and stuffed in a plastic bag.

Iraqi police found it in a vacant lot in the western Al-Mansur district at around 5 pm (1400 GMT) on Thursday, the ministry official said. It appeared he had been killed

recently.

Recognising that they had found a Westerner, police immediately contacted US forces who took charge of the body.

The State Department said earlier in Washington that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had confirmed that the body was that of Fox.

"The FBI verified the identity of a body found in Iraq this morning," spokesman Noel Clay told reporters.

"While additional forensics will be completed in the United States, they believe this is the body of Tom Fox."

Fox's three colleagues from the Chicago-based Christian Peacemaker Teams, a group that dispatches volunteers to crisis areas in a bid to reduce armed conflict, appeared Tuesday in a video broadcast by Al-Jazeera television. Fox was not with them.

Explosives found in Mumbai rail station

REUTERS, AFP, Mumbai/Lucknow

Police recovered several powerful explosives from a crowded railway station in India's financial capital yesterday, days after twin blasts in one of Hinduism's holiest cities killed 23 people.

The explosives were hidden in the toilet of the Byculla station in southern Mumbai, used by hundreds of thousands of commuters every day and close to the heart of the city.

An official at the bomb squad control room said crowds of people were cleared from a nearby beach where the explosives were destroyed with a controlled blast.

Mumbai police chief A.N. Roy said police were on high alert after Tuesday's blasts in the holy city of Varanasi that killed 15.

"Besides the explosives, we also found bomb-making material," Roy said.

India has not accepted a cap on its nuclear capability: PM

PTI, New Delhi

India has not accepted a cap on its strategic nuclear capability while entering into the civilian nuclear deal with the US, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared in the Lok Sabha yesterday.

Replying to a day-long discussion on the nuclear accord, Singh also declared that "we will not forego the three stage programme which will enable us to utilise the vast thorium reserves in future".

The Prime Minister said through the deal the government has "widened development options for meeting the adequate energy needs of the country" and has taken "full care" that the strategic programme is protected.

"It is a step forward which will take the country on a higher growth and development trajectory," he said.

said adding that research and development opportunities will also not be adversely affected due to the Indo-US agreement.

The Prime Minister said the US has given a number of assurances for uninterrupted supply of nuclear material for use in civilian reactors but in case of any stoppage the country has the "right to take corrective measures".

He also assured the House that the confidentiality of the strategic programme has remained "fully protected and will remain fully protected".

On the issue of closure of CIRUS reactor located in BARC, which has been declared a strategic site where no foreign inspection would be allowed, Singh said that only the fuel core of other nuclear reactor APSARA would be shifted and not the reactor itself.

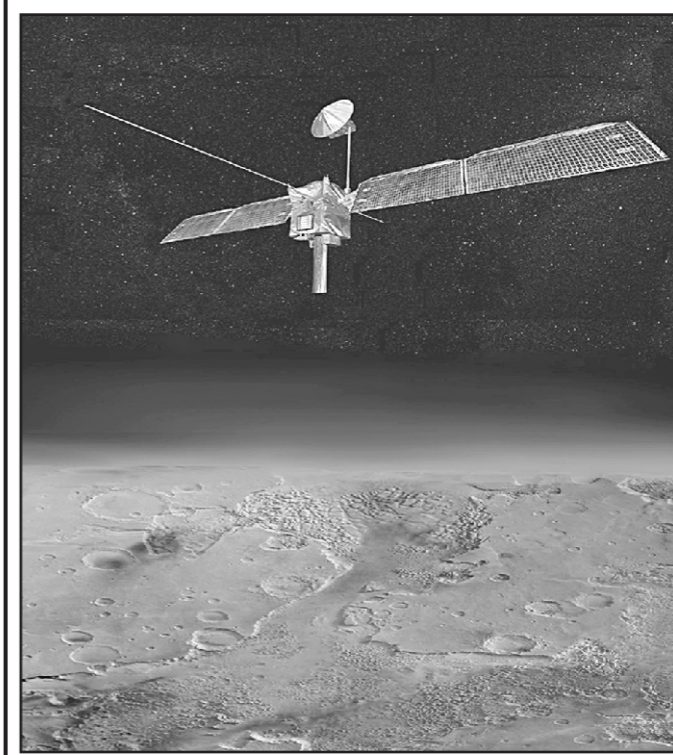


PHOTO: AFP
This undated Nasa artist's conception shows the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter (MRO) that will make high-resolution measurements of the surface of the Red Planet from orbit.

Spacecraft safely enters Mars orbit

AP, Pasadena

The Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter passed the biggest test of its life by safely entering orbit around the Red Planet, joining a constellation of circling spacecraft.

But other challenges lie ahead. Next month, the two-ton orbiter will begin another critical phase in its \$720 million mission. It will spend seven months dipping into Mars' upper atmosphere to shrink its current elliptical orbit to a circular one, which will take it as close as 200 miles above the surface.

The purpose is to get as close to Mars as possible to beam back detailed images.

"We got the capabilities that will knock your socks off," said project scientist Richard Zurek.

The Reconnaissance Orbiter joins Nasa's Mars Global Surveyor and Mars Odyssey and the European Space Agency's Mars Express, which already fly around the planet. On the surface, the Nasa rovers Spirit and Opportunity continue rolling across the planet.