

India thanks Russia for uranium supply plan

Seven deals clinched

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday thanked Russia for its decision to supply uranium to two fuel-starved nuclear reactors.

Indian officials said visiting Russian Premier Mikhail Fradkov endorsed New Delhi's request for 60 metric tonnes of uranium for two fuel-starved nuclear power reactors in the western town of Tarapur in Maharashtra state.

"I would... like to convey our warm appreciation to the Russian government for responding positively to our request for nuclear fuel supply to Tarapur 1 and 2," Singh said at a joint press conference with Fradkov.

The Indian foreign ministry said the two sides signed seven other agreements including a much-awaited pact between national space agencies of the two countries which will open the door to the launch of Russian navigation satellites by Indian space rockets.

Fradkov's two-day visit came just days after Washington said it opposed Moscow providing the uranium before India honoured its obligations under a landmark nuclear deal it struck with the United States during a visit earlier this month by President George W. Bush.

On Thursday the Russian premier defended Moscow's decision.

"We have served this issue within international framework and it does not contradict international commitments," Fradkov said after

flying into New Delhi. "The sale of uranium is in the interest of both the countries."

Singh said New Delhi was desperate to lower its dependence on costly fossil fuel for power generation.

"India envisions a substantial increase in the share of nuclear energy in its overall energy mix... I am confident that both countries will utilise opportunities to expand our partnership in civil nuclear energy cooperation," Singh said.

Neither Singh nor Fradkov mentioned the nuclear agreement between India and the United States at the joint news conference.

The US-India deal, which seeks to lift a decades-old ban on the

transfer of nuclear technology to India, still has to be approved by the US Congress and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

The Tarapur plant was built by US company General Electric in the 1960s but Washington halted uranium supplies after New Delhi staged its first nuclear tests in 1974 and refused to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Since then, the two plants have received sporadic supplies from Russia and France.

India says it first approached Washington for fuel for Tarapur but that the request was turned down due to US laws banning transfer of critical material outside the NSG.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture released by the US Army Thursday shows US and Iraqi soldiers walking out from a US helicopter somewhere north of Baghdad during Operation Swarmer. US and Iraqi forces launched a massive air assault operation described as the biggest since the invasion three years ago, targeting rebels loyal to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in a remote area north of Baghdad.

Indian cops kill 4 militants in Gujarat

REUTERS, New Delhi

Police shot dead four suspected militants overnight in Gujarat, the scene of bloody Hindu-Muslim violence in 2002.

Police were conducting routine searches in Ahmedabad after midnight when they were shot at and returned fire, state police chief A.K. Bhargava said.

"We have not yet been able to establish their links or motives. Some arms and ammo also found. Two of them are Pakistanis and the other two Kashmiris," he said.

He did not explain how police determined the identities of the dead.

In 2002, Hindu-Muslim bloodshed wracked the state after 59 Hindu pilgrims died in a train fire originally blamed on a Muslim mob but later determined by an official inquiry to be an accident.

No sign of poisoning in Milosevic's body: Tests

AFP, The Hague

Forensic tests found no sign of poisoning or the unapproved antibiotic rifampicin in the body of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, the president of the UN war crimes tribunal said yesterday.

Tests by the Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI) showed "no indication of poisoning" or rifampicin, a powerful antibiotic that could have counteracted Milosevic's heart medication, said the tribunal president, Fausto Pocar.

Other drugs were found in the samples tested, but "not in toxic quantities," he said.

Asylum requests to West drop to near 20-yr low

REUTERS, Geneva

Contrary to popular belief, the number of people seeking asylum in the West has halved over the last five years to the lowest level in nearly two decades, the United Nations refugee agency said yesterday.

Asylum applications lodged in 50 industrialised countries fell sharply for a fourth year in a row to 336,000 claims in 2005, according to provisional annual figures, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) said. This was 15 per cent lower than the previous year.

In Europe -- where far-right parties in some countries have whipped up fears over a flood of refugees -- the number of asylum seekers last year was the lowest since 1988, it added.

"These figures show that talk in the industrialised countries of a growing asylum problem does not reflect the reality," UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said in a statement.

"Indeed, industrialised countries should be asking themselves whether by imposing ever tighter restrictions on asylum seekers they are not closing their doors to men, women and children fleeing persecution," added Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister.

The total number of asylum seekers arriving last year in 38 Western countries for which comparable historical statistics are available was the lowest since 1987, according to the UNHCR.

Norway names new Lanka peace envoy

REUTERS, Oslo

Norway appointed a new peace envoy yesterday to help mediate between Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels after a conflict in which 64,000 people have died.

Foreign ministry peace expert Jon Hanssen-Bauer, 53, would take over from Erik Solheim, who became Norway's International Development Minister in October 2005 after six years focused only on Sri Lanka.

Hamas may make peace with Israel: Haniyeh

AP, Jerusalem

The Palestinians' incoming prime minister suggested Hamas could one day make peace with Israel, but undercut his statement by saying his militant group would not disarm or recognise Israel unless it recognised a Palestinian state within boundaries the Israelis reject.

Israel dismissed the comments as doubletalk.

Asked in an interview with CBS News aired Thursday if he could foresee a day

when he would be invited to sign a peace agreement with Israel, Ismail Haniyeh replied: "Let's hope so."

But Hamas, which won Palestinian parliamentary elections in a landslide in January, has rebuffed Israel's conditions for talks, namely, that the group disarm and recognise the Jewish state's right to exist.

Haniyeh told CBS that Hamas wouldn't meet those conditions for talks unless Israel "recognised a Palestinian state within the bound-

aries of Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem."

Israel, while accepting the principle of an independent Palestinian state, has said many times that it has no intention of returning to the borders it held before capturing those territories in the 1967 Middle East war.

Haniyeh is considered a pragmatist, but he does not call the shots in the Palestinian government. Major Hamas decisions are taken in secret by a group of leaders inside and outside Gaza and the West Bank.



PHOTO: AFP

Visiting Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan (C) poses for photographs with president of the opposition Nepali Congress (NC) Girija Prasad Koirala (L) and NC youth leader Sujata Koirala (R) during a meeting in Kathmandu yesterday.

THREE YEARS AFTER IRAQ INVASION

Iran in US sights over its nuke ambition

AFP, Tehran

Three years after the launch of the US-led war that ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, the Shia clerical regime in neighbouring Iran is now clearly in Washington's sights over its nuclear ambitions.

But barely had the White House declared Iran its number one threat, than Tehran said it was willing to talk to its arch-enemy over Iraq, currently teetering on the brink of all-out civil war.

Washington, which once branded Iran as part of an "axis of evil" with North Korea and Saddam's Iraq, has

been piling the pressure on Tehran over its nuclear programme and accusing it of meddling in Iraq.

The White House this week bluntly warned both Iran and North Korea that it would take preemptive military action if necessary to protect itself, making no apologies for the war in Iraq.

"We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran," the White House said in a blueprint called the "National Security Strategy" obtained by AFP on Thursday.

Washington has been spearheading the international campaign against Iran over its nuclear power

efforts, which the United States claims is a cover for efforts to develop atomic weapons -- charges vehemently denied by Tehran.

President George W. Bush had made Saddam's alleged possession of chemical and biological weapons and pursuit of nuclear arms the centrepiece of his case for war, but no such weapons have been found.

"There will always be some uncertainty" about banned weapons programmes, the White House said. "We have no doubt that the world is better off if tyrants know that they pursue WMD at their own peril."

Bush urges Cong to okay nuke deal

AP, Washington

President Bush has asked Congress to approve a landmark plan to share civilian nuclear technology with India, even as critics say the agreement's details have not been fully negotiated.

A bill to implement the plan was introduced on Bush's behalf Thursday by the two leaders of Congress' foreign relations committees, Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., and Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind. Neither indicated support for the bill.

The legislation would exempt India from US laws that restrict trade with countries that have not submitted to full nuclear inspections. New Delhi has refused to sign the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and critics fear Bush's plan will allow rogue countries to build nuclear weapons programs with impunity, using imported civilian

nuclear technology.

Hyde and Lugar promised a thorough review, with hearings scheduled in coming weeks with top officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Analysts say Congress will be debating a plan with many loose ends.

While a March 2 agreement by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh determined a crucial part of the plan separating India's civilian and military nuclear facilities the two countries still must negotiate the conditions, duration and scope of the overall cooperation plan.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, said those negotiations "have not even started and will take months if not a year or more to complete."

Evidence of universe expansion found

AP, Washington

Physicists announced Thursday that they now have the smoking gun that shows the universe went through extremely rapid expansion in the moments after the big bang, growing from the size of a marble to a volume larger than all of observable space in less than a trillion-trillionth of a second.

The discovery which involves an analysis of variations in the brightness of microwave radiation is the first direct evidence to support the two-decade-old theory that the universe went through what is called inflation.

It also helps explain how matter eventually clumped together into planets, stars and galaxies in a universe that began as a remarkably smooth, superhot soup.

"It's giving us our first clues about how inflation took place," said Michael Turner, assistant director for mathematics and physical sciences at the National Science Foundation. "This is absolutely amazing."

Brian Greene, a Columbia University physicist, said: "The observations are spectacular and the conclusions are stunning."

Researchers found the evi-

dence for inflation by looking at a faint glow that permeates the universe. That glow, known as the cosmic microwave background, was produced when the universe was about 300,000 years old long after inflation had done its work.

But just as a fossil tells a palaeontologist about long-extinct life, the pattern of light in the cosmic microwave background offers clues about what came before it. Of specific interest to physicists are subtle brightness variations that give images of the microwave background a lumpy appearance.

Physicists presented new measurements of those variations during a news conference at Princeton University. The measurements were made by a spaceborne instrument called the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe, or WMAP, launched by Nasa in 2001.

Earlier studies of WMAP data have determined that the universe is 13.7 billion years old, give or take a few hundred thousand years. WMAP also measured variations in the cosmic microwave background so huge that they stretch across the entire sky.

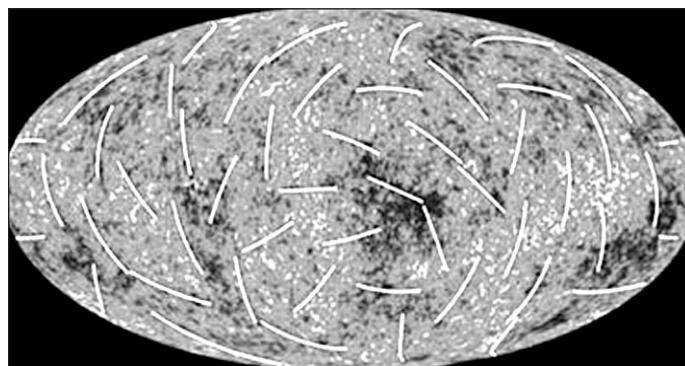


PHOTO: AP

This image provided by Nasa shows the results from the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP). According to scientists WMAP has produced a new, more detailed picture of the infant universe.