

US Cong set to clear Indian nuke deal in first vote

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers are expected to give conditional backing this week to a US civilian nuclear deal with India in the first congressional vote on the controversial agreement since it was first adopted nearly a year ago.

The House International Relations Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations committee are scheduled to consider the far-reaching deal today and tomorrow respectively.

Both the administration of President George W. Bush and Congress are confident the deal would win majority bipartisan support in the committees before they go for voting in the two full chambers possibly next month.

"There appears to be pretty strong support" in the Senate committee for the deal based on a bipartisan bill to be introduced by Republican Senator Dick Lugar and Democratic Senator Joseph Biden, Lugar's spokesman Andy Fisher said.

Lugar, chairman of the Senate panel, has posed to the Bush administration a total of 187 questions on the deal following concerns by lawmakers over the repercussions of extending civil nuclear technology to India, which is not a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In the House international relations committee, "there is tremendous support although not necessarily unanimous," said Lynne Weil, spokeswoman for the highest ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee Tom Lantos.

While majority of the House panel's lawmakers are expected to vote to endorse the deal, they could hold off on a vote to change US nuclear law until the completion of a final agreement and safeguards India would be subjected to, congressional aides said.

"We expect a lot of discussions and committee members with concerns will have the opportunity to raise them," Weil said, adding that the House panel's debate would be based on a bipartisan bill by Lantos and Republican committee chairman Henry Hyde. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, the chief US negotiator of the deal, also predicted easy passage of the bill.

"I'm not going to be so rash, perhaps foolish to predict a vote count but we are very confident that we have majority support in the House and Senate," he said following extensive discussions with Congressional leaders.

The US Atomic Energy Act of 1954 currently prevents the United States from trading nuclear technology with nations not party to the NPT such as India. It has to be amended for the deal to be effective.

Under the deal first agreed upon by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July last year, the United States will aid the development of civil nuclear power programs in India in return for New Delhi placing its civil nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.

India tested nuclear weapons in 1974 and 1998 and is currently banned by the United States and other mostly industrialized nations from buying fuel for atomic reactors and other related equipment as a result.

Some legislators against the deal say it would not only make it harder to enforce rules against nuclear renegades Iran and North Korea, but also set a dangerous precedent for other countries with nuclear ambitions.

"We intend to make the case that the purported benefits of this deal are an illusion, and the risks to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime are quite real," said House Democratic Representative Ed Markey.

Last week, a distinguished group of nonproliferation experts from across the political spectrum wrote a letter to Congress arguing that the nuclear deal would put the United States in violation of its central obligation under the NPT -- not assisting a non-nuclear weapon state in its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

They charged that the deal could free up India's "limited domestic nuclear fuel making capacity to produce highly enriched uranium and plutonium for weapons."



Models, mirrors and clocked Eiffel Tower on display yesterday at the Eiffel Tower in Paris prior to the public auction of tower memorabilia. Important publications such as "The 300-Meter Tower" by French engineer and the tower builder Gustave Eiffel or "Thirty-Six Panoramas of the Eiffel Tower" illustrated by Henri Riviere will be up for auction alongside rare turn-of-the-century publications, guides, catalogs, reviews and newspapers and even an original lithography (extremely rare). They will be auctioned off in association with the company managing the monument.

East Timor's embattled premier steps down

AFP, Dili

East Timor's Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri resigned on Monday, caving in to weeks of pressure to step down in a move expected to ease tensions in the impoverished nation.

The premier had faced demands to quit since late May, when unrest on the streets rocked the capital Dili, leading to the deaths of 21 people and forcing nearly 150,000 people to flee their homes.

More than 2,200 foreign peacekeepers were deployed here to restore order but political leaders have since wrangled over how to move forward.

The pressure was cranked up last week when President Xanana Gusmao, a hero of East Timor's independence movement, ordered Alkatiri to resign to take responsibility for the crisis. He threatened to resign if Alkatiri would not.

Alkatiri faced the press on Monday, telling reporters: "I declare I am ready to resign my position as prime minister of the government... so as to avoid the resignation of His Excellency the President of the Republic."

The premier said he had "deeply reflected" on the present situation in East Timor and said the interests of the nation were paramount.

"Assuming my own share of responsibility for the crisis affecting our country, I am determined not to contribute to any deepening of the crisis," he said, adding that he would stay on as a member of parliament.

"I am ready to dialogue with... the president in order to contribute if necessary to the formation of an interim government," he said.

He said he hoped militants and his own party would accept his decision.

The statement was read out on the verandah of his official residence, in Portuguese, Tetum and English. Alkatiri did not take any questions.

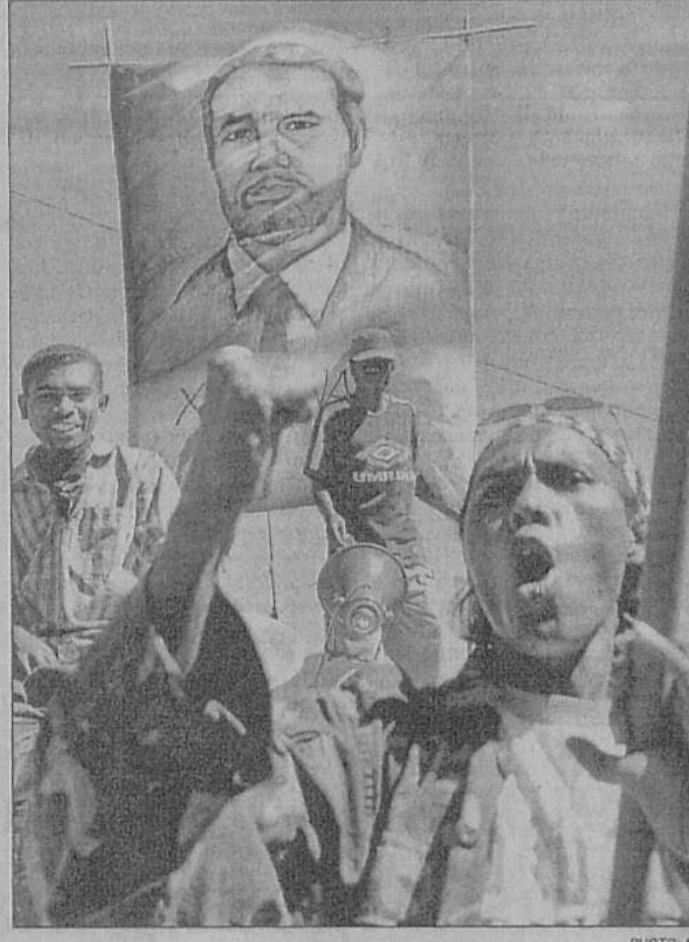
There was immediate jubilation on the streets of Dili, where hundreds lined the roads in the city centre as truckloads of Alkatiri's opponents drove through, waving flags, cheering and singing songs.

"We're so happy that he has stepped down. He gave out weapons to the people to kill others and he divided the country into two halves," Rosario Braga, 24, a passenger in one of the trucks, told AFP.

He was referring to allegations that Alkatiri assented to having a hit squad formed to kill his opponents. An Australian documentary purporting to show evidence of Alkatiri's involvement triggered Gusmao's initial demand that the premier step down.

Alkatiri has denied the accusations and East Timor's prosecutor-general has said he has no evidence of his involvement. One of Alkatiri's allies however has been charged over distributing the arms.

The prime minister is also accused of triggering last month's unrest by dismissing some 600 soldiers in March.



East Timorese youths celebrate in Dili after Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri resigned yesterday.

US plans to deploy Patriots in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

The United States is considering deploying Patriot interceptor missiles in Japan amid fears North Korea will launch a long-range missile, the Defense Agency said Monday.

The deployment of the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) missiles on the southern island chain of Okinawa would mark the first time the US military has deployed surface-to-air missiles in Japan.

The Yomiuri Shimbun, citing unnamed government sources, said Washington told Tokyo at a June 17 working-level meeting in Hawaii of the plans to install three to four Patriot missiles at its Okinawa bases.

An additional 500 to 600 US troops also would be deployed along with the PAC-3 missiles by the end of the year, Japan's top-selling daily said.

Tokyo plans to accept the deployment despite expected concerns in Okinawa, which hosts 75 percent of US military facilities in Japan, it said.

Some 8,000 of the 20,000 US troops in Okinawa are set to leave by 2012 under a recently approved deal.

Japan's Defense Agency confirmed that the two countries were in talks on deploying Patriot missiles.

"Japan and the United States are in talks," a Defense Agency spokesman said. "But no details have been finalized and they can't be confirmed now because the talks are still ongoing."

Murdoch named most influential Australian ever

AFP, Sydney

Media mogul Rupert Murdoch has been named the most influential Australian of all time in a list of 100 candidates that includes athletes, entertainers and murderers.

The list compiled by the weekly Bulletin news magazine includes everyone from national icons such as cricketer Don Bradman to controversial figures including populist politician Pauline Hanson and bushranger Ned Kelly.

Bulletin news editor Tim Blair said Murdoch came out on top after months of debate among a panel of prominent Australians assembled by the magazine.

"His influence on a global scale is of a magnitude unparalleled among Australians," Blair told AFP. "No one else even comes close."

He said Murdoch's selection may prove unpopular with some but there was no doubting the clout wielded by the man who now heads the world's fifth largest media group and holds US citizenship.

"They may think it's more of a blessing but it's a list of the most influential Australians, not the best Australians," he said.

The list, to be published Wednesday, was not released in numerical order but others in the top 10 included Murdoch's fellow media tycoon, the recently-deceased Kerry Packer, feminist Germaine Greer and Nobel Prize-winning author Patrick White.

Athletes featured prominently in this sports-mad nation, with cricketer Shane Warne named for his role in reviving the art of leg-spin bowling.

Blair said entertainer Kylie Minogue was also included in the list of 100 because of her role in paving the way for Australian acts in overseas markets.

Russian hostages slain as Iraq PM talks peace

AFP, Baghdad

Four Russian hostages were brutally executed in Iraq by Al-Qaeda insurgents even as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki talked of peace with rebel groups in a national reconciliation plan.

The Al-Qaeda-led Mujahideen Shura (consultative) Council in Iraq claimed Sunday it killed the four hostages, saying Russia had failed to meet its demand to withdraw from Chechnya and free Muslim prisoners.

A statement issued along with a gruesome Internet video showing two of the hostages being executed said: "We present the implementation of Allah's rule against the Russian diplomats to comfort the believers."

"It is also in revenge for our brothers and sisters and what they suffer of torture, killing and displacement by the infidel Russian government."

The videotape showed four hostages speaking in separate messages dated June 13, before two of them were shown being killed and another after his murder.

The first was held on his knees in front of two masked black-clad men, one of whom produced a knife and beheaded the captive. Another body was shown lying in a pool of blood with its severed head placed on its back.

A third hostage was shown kneeling handcuffed and blindfolded before being shot in the head. There was no sign of the fourth.

Fyodor Zaytsev, Rinat Aglyulin, Anatoly Smirnov and Oleg Fedosyev were abducted on June 3 when gunmen ambushed their vehicle in the upscale west Baghdad district of Mansur. A fifth diplomat, Vitaly Titov, was killed.

The brutal murders come a little more than a week after two US soldiers were found dead with their throats slit after being kidnapped by the same group on June 16.

The video was a chilling reminder of the deadly campaign of hostage-taking and beheadings that was unleashed across Iraq by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, who was killed in a US air strike on June 7.

A few weeks before his death, more than a dozen heads were found in vegetable and fruit boxes lying in open fields in the ethnically volatile town of Baquba, north of Baghdad, while dozens of headless corpses have been recovered from the Tigris river.

More than 40 foreigners are currently held captive across Iraq by various rebel groups, while thousands of Iraqis have also been abducted in the last year alone, largely for ransom, with some abducted more than once.

The executions, and the killing at least 21 Iraqis in attacks Sunday, came as Maliki unveiled a national reconciliation plan in a bid to curb the raging violence.

REPORT AT UN CONFERENCE AK-47 to remain world's favorite killing machine for next 20 yrs

AFP, United Nations

The Kalashnikov assault rifle will remain the world's favorite killing machine in conflict zones for at least the next 20 years because its production is poorly regulated, a report released here Monday said.

Up to 70 million AK-47s and variations of its design are in circulation around the world, including in the state arsenal of at least 82 countries, according to the report by the Control Arms Campaign, which lobbies for small arms controls.

AK-47s are used to "massacre, maim, rape and abuse, torture and fuel violent crime in countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Britain, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Mexico, Sierra Leone, the US, Venezuela and Yemen," the report added.

It noted that "the large number of production facilities, the widespread availability of surplus Kalashnikovs, and the absence of global standards and laws to regulate their transfer make it easy for the weapons to fall into the hands of unscrupulous arms brokers, armed militia and criminals."

Produced in at least 14 countries across four continents, the AK-47, which can be fired at a rate of 600 bullets per minute, can be bought for as little as 30 dollars in parts of Africa.

The report was released just as a two-week UN conference got under way here Monday to review efforts to stem the illegal trade in small arms and light weapons.

It quoted the AK-47's inventor, Lieutenant-General Mikhail Kalashnikov, as pleading for strict international regulation of the small arms trade.

"Because of the lack of international control over arms sales, small arms easily find their way to anywhere in the world to be used not only for national defense but by aggressors, terrorists and all kinds of criminals," the Russian inventor said.

"People often ask me whether I feel guilty about human suffering that is caused by the attacks with AK-47," he added. "But it is not the designers who must ultimately take responsibility for where guns end up. It is governments who must control their production and export."

Buffett to give away 85pc of wealth to charity

AFP, New York

Warren Buffett, the world's second richest man, on Sunday announced plans to give away an estimated 85 percent of his estimated 44 billion dollar wealth to charity.

Most of the donations will, ironically, go to a foundation run by Bill Gates, the wealthiest man on the planet.

The investment guru said in a statement that on Monday he would act on letters sent to Gates and other foundations that "that contain irrevocable pledges" to start transferring shares in his Berkshire Hathaway conglomerate to them from July.

He explained the motivation for his gesture in an interview with Fortune magazine, which said the handouts would amount to about 85 percent of his wealth.

"I know what I want to do," he was quoted as saying, "and it makes sense to get going."

Buffett said there were no immediate concerns about his health and that he is still "having fun" working in high finance.

"I feel terrific and when I had my last physical, in October, my doctor gave me a clean bill of health," he said.

But he did make a link to the death of his wife, Susan Buffett, in July 2004.

The two had been living apart but remained close and Buffett said: "She and I always assumed that she would inherit my Berkshire stock and be the one who oversaw the distribution of our wealth to society."

Buffett, 75, made his billions from astute investments that turned him into an world acclaimed operator.

The son of a stock broker and member of Congress, Buffett reportedly bought his first shares on the stock market at the age of 11. Virtually all of the money is concentrated in Berkshire Hathaway, which has interests range from insurance to property, energy and jet leasing.

The shares will go to five foundations. But more than 83 percent of the stock will go to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which already has a kitty of about 30 billion dollars used to pay for medical research and give educational grants.



Global drug control effort working

AFP, United Nations

Worldwide efforts to fight the use of illegal drugs are working but this positive result could easily be reversed, a United Nations drug report said on Monday.

"Drug control is working and the world drug problem is being contained," Antonio Maria Costa, head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), said upon publication of the 2006 World Drug Report by his agency in Vienna.

"Worldwide efforts to reduce the threat posed by illicit drugs have effectively reversed a quarter-century-long rise in drug abuse that, if left unchecked, could have become a global pandemic," Costa said in a statement released along with the report.

The UNODC said there had been major successes in 2005 in the so-called Golden Triangle of south-east Asia.

In this region where Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand and Laos meet, Myanmar has reduced opium poppy cultivation -- which can be used to produce heroin, morphine and opium -- by 26 percent while Laos cut it by as much as 72 percent and was "on the verge of becoming opium poppy free."

In central Asia, in Afghanistan, which is the world's main producer of opium, poppy cultivation was down for the first time since 2001 but it could go up again this year, the UNODC report warned.

"Afghanistan's drug situation remains vulnerable to reversal because of mass poverty, lack of security and the fact that the authorities have inadequate control over its territory," Costa said, adding that "this could happen as early as 2006."

Cannabis, or marijuana, the world's most widely used drug, has seen a steady increase in consumption over the past decade and this rise in use is continuing, the report said.

Of the 200 million people or five percent of the world's population aged 15-64 who use drugs at least once a year, 162 million use cannabis, 2004 figures show.

Production and demand are also increasing, but given the ease with which cannabis can be grown and the widespread way in which it is consumed, with people often sharing a marijuana joint, or cigarette, "it is difficult to estimate the size of the global market," the report said.

While it has been regarded as a soft and relatively harmless drug, cannabis is growing in potency.

"Today, the harmful characteristics of cannabis are no longer that different from those of other plant-based drugs such as cocaine and heroin," Costa said.

He hit out at Western and celebrity lifestyles that have led to an alarming increase in cocaine consumption in Europe, which accounts for 26 percent of world cocaine use, despite the global trend showing a slight decline in recent years.

"Too many professional, educated Europeans use cocaine, often denying their addiction, and drug abuse by celebrities is often presented uncritically by the media, leaving young people confused and vulnerable," Costa said.

A global approach is therefore needed to tackle the drug problem, with rich and poor countries getting involved in a coordinated way, Costa said.

Tigers warn of war if Norway quits peace process

AFP, Colombo

European Union monitors quit.

The rebels have questioned the neutrality of observers from EU members Finland, Sweden and Denmark after the organisation outlawed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last month, forcing Norway to re-evaluate the monitors' role.

But the rebels have eased their demand that the EU monitors leave within one month. Norway has suggested a six-month transitional period to replace the 37 observers.

The LTTE has made no official comment on an offer from President Mahinda Rajapakse to open direct talks with the guerrillas, but rebel sources say they have made it clear they would not bypass Norway in any fresh peace initiative.

The Tiger warning came as the Sri Lankan army's deputy chief of staff was killed by what the government said was an LTTE suicide bomber.

Tamil Tiger guerrillas Monday warned that Sri Lanka would descend into full-scale war if peace broker Norway quit, as the killing of a top army general ended a week-long lull in violence.

Tiger political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan told the tamilnet.com website that war would be "unavoidable" if Norway pulled out after June 29 crisis talks to discuss the future of the truce monitoring mission here.

He said such a decision "would signal an end to the already fragile ceasefire and plunge the island into war," the pro-rebel website reported.

The Norway-brokered truce -- the key to a peace initiative aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed which has claimed more than 60,000 lives -- was thrown further into crisis by the Tigers' demand last week that

Nepal's rebel chief in Kathmandu to push peace talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist leaders have returned to Nepal's capital to push forward talks on drafting an interim constitution ahead of national elections, a rebel spokesman said Monday.

"Maoist chairman Prachanda and leader Baburam Bhattarai arrived in Kathmandu Saturday evening to engage in consultations regarding the peace process. They will stay in the capital for the next couple of days," Ananta, the central region rebel commander who uses just one name, told AFP.

The two sides agreed on a historic power-sharing in June that saw the rebel leader emerge from hiding after a decade to meet with Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala to create a framework to end an insurgency that has claimed more than 12,500 lives.

The eight-point deal includes drafting an interim constitution to allow the rebels to join the government and then elect a constituent assembly to rewrite the 1990 constitution, including a proposal to abolish or severely limit the role of the 250-year-old monarchy.

King Gyanendra, who sacked the government and seized power in February 2005, was forced to hand back control to an alliance of seven political parties in April after weeks of bloody protests.

Since then, the interim government has stripped him of all political authority including his control of the army.

A key sticking point however remains setting up a system of arms management for the army and the rebels, likely monitored by the United Nations, to create a conducive environment for constituent assembly elections.

The rebel leaders met with Madhav Kumar Nepal, general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist and held discussions on political issues Sunday morning.

Discussions between Prachanda and Koirala were expected later this week, Sharma said.