

US warships dock in former Saigon

AFP, Ho Chi Minh City

Two US Navy warships docked yesterday at Vietnam's southern port of Ho Chi Minh City, a month after US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited Hanoi to reinforce military ties.

The visit is the third by an American military vessel to the former Saigon since the 1975 end of the Vietnam War, and the fourth overall to Vietnam.

But it marks the first time that two US ships have visited the communist country at the same time.

The event is part of efforts to ease lingering distrust between the militaries of the two former foes following the war, during which more than 58,000 Americans and about three million Vietnamese died.

"Relations between the two countries are now normalised and this visit contributes to reinforce relations, especially regarding regional security issues and anti-terrorism," said Vietnamese navy Colonel Dang Thuc Hoa.



IUBAT Vice Chancellor Prof Alimullah Miyan speaks at a roundtable conference at the Cirdap auditorium in the city yesterday organised by Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh. On his left are Vice Chairman of the association Abul Quasem Haider, Chairman of the association MA Kashem and Law Minister Moudud Ahmed.

Violence kills 1,000 Iraqis in June Officials say

AFP, Baghdad

At least 1,009 Iraqis, including civilians, soldiers and policemen, were killed in rebel attacks in June, government officials said Saturday.

In May the total number of people killed was 1,055, according to statistics obtained by AFP from the ministries of interior, defence and health.

At 1,771, the number of people wounded in June was more than 24 percent higher than the 1,423 recorded in May.

Iraqi civilians continued to be the main target of rebels in June with at least 887 killed against 932 in May, while 1,588 civilians were wounded compared to 1,271.

A total of 79 policemen were killed and 126 wounded against 95 and 97 respectively in May, an interior ministry official said.

June saw 43 Iraqi soldiers killed and 57 wounded against 28 and 58 the previous month, a defence ministry official said.

There were 19 car bombings attacks during the month against 26 in May. The authorities also counted 32 roadside bombings and three suicide bombings against 65 and 24 the previous month. There were 24 shootings compared with 60 in May.

Officials said that 93 insurgents were killed in June against 324 the previous month.

India unveils cash plans to stop farmer suicides

REUTERS, Mumbai

India on Saturday announced millions of dollars in one-time hand-out and debt relief to cotton farmers after thousands killed themselves unable to repay loans taken for their crops.

Across India's sprawling western and southern plateau, where the black soil has long born a rich harvest of cotton, more than 3,600 farmers committed suicide in just four states over the past five years, according to official statistics.

But activists and farmers' groups say the figure is at least five times that.

Most of the suicides are reported from the three southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka -- where the urban economy is booming -- as well as the prosperous western state of Maharashtra, home to India's finan-

cial capital, Mumbai.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said his government was handing out more than \$155 million in one-time grants and interest waivers.

"In many cases, the overdue interest exceeds the principal amount. The entire (interest) amount will be waived ... so that they are eligible for fresh loans," Singh said after touring Maharashtra's Vidharba region.

He said debts totalling another \$283 million were being restructured so farmers could repay over 3-5 years. He also announced a one-year moratorium on loan repayments for eligible farmers.

Many farmers borrow -- often amounts that would only buy a few drinks in a chic London or New York pub -- from the village moneylender at rates as high as 10 percent a month.

Their debts soar when crops fail or prices tumble. But those borrowing privately are not eligible for government relief.

Even those who borrow from banks, including state-run rural banks, often have to pay bribes for their loans.

Agriculture supports 600 million people, but contributes only a fifth of India's gross domestic product and accounts for only 12 percent of bank credit.

Singh's Congress swept to power in 2004 largely riding the support of the rural poor unhappy at missing out on the benefits of India's booming economy, one of the world's fastest growing.

But rising inflation and slow job creation have threatened to spoil the ruling Congress Party's image as a champion of the "aam admi", or common man.

Kyoto climate pact backers waver as emissions rise

REUTERS, Oslo

Five years after berating Washington for pulling out, many backers of the UN's Kyoto Protocol are wavering in the fight against global warming.

Many European Union nations are giving high-polluting industries and power generators easier than expected targets in plans due to be submitted to Brussels by June 30 about how they aim to meet cleaner air goals by 2008-12.

And Ottawa gave Kyoto the worst snub to date in March, saying Canada would be unable to reach a goal of cutting fossil fuel emissions from factories, power plants and cars by 2012.

"EU member states seem to be competing with each other to give more beneficial allocations (to industry). It won't add up," said Terry Barker, director of the Cambridge Centre for Climate Change Mitigation Research at Cambridge University.

At the heart of much climate debate is who will pay -- and how much -- to curb what many scientists say could be drastic climate changes ranging from droughts to rising sea levels.

"Environmentalists said Kyoto would be virtually cost-free," said Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish Kyoto sceptic who heads the Copenhagen Consensus Center. Lax EU goals

show "most countries are starting to realise that it will be very costly," he said.

Lomborg reckons Kyoto would cost \$150 billion (82 billion pounds) a year if fully implemented and that fighting disease and hunger, ensuring clean water or promoting free trade would be money better spent.

Many other experts say costs are likely to be insignificant.

Costs Low? A study in the journal Nature last month estimated that even the toughest global climate goals for the entire 21st century -- far beyond Kyoto -- would only brake growth of the world economy by one percentage point by 2100.

"The price of Kyoto will be less than many people thought," said David Doniger, a climate expert at the Natural Resources Defence Council in Washington.

President George W Bush pulled out in 2001, saying Kyoto would cost US jobs and wrongly omits poor nations. Many Kyoto supporters who bitterly criticised Bush at the time are now jibing at tough measures.

Among EU nations, for instance, both France and Germany on Thursday proposed plans that will allow rises in emissions.

Germany, Europe's biggest polluter, is proposing to cut its

emissions by nearly 5.6 percent in 2008-12 from 2005-07. But it blew off the cap by offering all new power plants -- including those run on coal -- unlimited free emissions until 2022.

The EU Commission can reject schemes it considers too lax. Kyoto obliges 35 rich nations to cut emissions of greenhouse gases by an average 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12.

"The Europeans will meet their target but the question is 'how?'. They are letting the large industrial sectors off easily," said Steve Sawyer, climate policy expert at Greenpeace.

He said governments would instead have to squeeze emissions by measures such as higher taxes on energy use -- muting the incentive for power stations to shift to cleaner technologies.

EU emissions overall rose by 0.4 percent in 2004 from 2003 but are 4.8 percent below 1990 levels thanks mainly to declines in eastern

Europe after the collapse of Soviet-era industries.

Canada's new Conservative government has said it cannot meet its Kyoto goal. Emissions are likely to rise as it exploits oil sands made attractive by high oil prices above \$70 a barrel.

"As long as Canada is really keen on getting to these sands there is not much chance of reducing emissions," said Hermann Ott, director of the climate policy division at the German Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy.

He said that Canada's coolness to Kyoto was bad news for anyone hoping that the United States might eventually sign up.

If Canada -- bordering the United States and with a similar economic structure -- could manage Kyoto then Washington might be encouraged to follow, according to Kyoto fans. "At the moment Canada is pointing in the other direction," Ott said.

Politics impedes WMD controls: Russia

AP, Moscow

Russia's defence minister, in an apparent swipe at the United States, said Friday that international efforts to rein in the spread of weapons of mass destruction are being impeded by politics.

Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov did not mention the United States by name, but his comments came in connection with the release of a government report that also appeared to criticize Washington for its stance on nonproliferation issues.

"In recent years we have been

witness to how the approach of certain countries (to) solving the problem of fighting the spread of WMDs has taken on a more political character," Ivanov told a news conference.

"A distinct chilling is taking place," Ivanov said, citing issues including the deployment of weapons in space and biological weapons. Russia has frequently criticized the United States over its possible use of space weapons and has said Washington is scuttling efforts to strengthen the international biological weapons treaty.

Philippines, Spain sign defence accord

AFP, Manila

The Philippines and former colonial masters Spain signed an agreement yesterday aimed at boosting defence ties and at increasing cooperation in the fight against terrorism and international crime.

The memorandum of intent was signed when Philippine President Gloria Arroyo met with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and other Spanish leaders, a presidential statement said in Manila.

Philippine Defence Secretary Avelino Cruz was quoted as saying that the two countries had to improve their defence ties that are presently limited to logistics cooperation and the exchange of information.

He called for greater dialogue and for the setting up of a joint team to study cooperation in other areas such as education, counter-terrorism, fighting transnational crime, and maritime security.

"We need to have a strong ally here in the European Union. For them, they need to have an ally in Asean (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and we are their most logical ally," he said.

The Philippines, a former Spanish colony with a largely Roman Catholic populace, is a mainstay of Asean, which also includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Philippines is seeking to upgrade its poorly-equipped military, which is battling both a nationwide communist insurgency and Muslim extremists in the south linked to the al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah terror networks.

REUTERS, Colombo

Someone is killed almost every day in the crossfire of Sri Lanka's undeclared war with Tamil Tiger rebels, but the island is likely to be tormented by low-intensity attrition rather than all-out war -- for now.

Escalating ambushes, suicide attacks and military clashes have killed more than 700 civilians, soldiers, police and rebels so far this year, raising the spectre of a return to a two-decade civil war that has killed more than 65,000 people since 1983.

Some diplomats believe it is just a matter of time before war reignites. Others feel neither side is ready for a full-blown conflict, and while constantly provoking the military, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are eager not to be seen as the ones to start a major conflict.

"The Tigers are moving towards a war state, but not a war involving mass troop movements. We'll see more ambushes, more Tamil civilians being killed, more clashes -- low intensity attrition," said one Western diplomat.

"Grenade attacks are the new peace."

Some analysts believe the Tigers are trying to provoke an ethnic backlash against minority Tamils by the majority Sinhalese, and are using the increasingly tattered 2002 ceasefire to buy time to regroup and rearm.

The Tigers say they are ready to fight a war if one is thrust on them by the government, and told Reuters this month they would resort to all strategies -- including suicide bombings -- if war resumes.

"I don't think there is going to be any dramatic change in the situation in the short run, in spite of a lot of sabre-rattling on the part of the LTTE," said Gerald Peiris, Professor Emeritus at the University of Peradeniya.

Peace Bid Deadlocked

The Tigers pulled out of a fresh round of truce talks in April, and are now insisting that Nordic truce monitors from European Union countries must quit the island by September 1 in light of a new EU terror ban against them. Many fear that could create a dangerous

vacuum at a time when attacks are soaring.

"The problem with the ceasefire agreement is that what we normally define as a ceasefire is not what we have in the country today," said Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) spokesman Thorfinnur Omarsson. "Officially there's a ceasefire, but it is violated all the time."

"One could say the ceasefire is in real danger. On the ground it often looks as though there isn't one," he added. "In a situation of full-scale war, you don't need a monitoring mission any more. Our mandate is not to witness a full-scale war."

Ordinary Sri Lankans are increasingly scared. Around 3,000 Tamils have fled to neighbouring India since April, paying smugglers to ferry them across, and the United Nations estimates nearly 40,000 people have been displaced since April.

Business leaders, the Central Bank and even the World Bank have all warned that renewed war could choke the \$23 billion (12 billion pound) economy -- forecast to expand 7.0 percent this year.

Strict security blanket planned in city

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important points of the capital including bus terminals, train stations and launch terminals. Senior leaders of the opposition coalition will be present at the spots.

The city points for demonstrations are Gabtoli bus stand, Azampur bus stand in Uttara, Jatrabari crossing, Sadarghat lunch terminal, Kamalapur railway station, Sayedabad bus terminal, Postogola Alam market, Babubazar bridge over the Buriganga River, Moghbazar rail gate, Malibagh shopping centre, Motijheel Shapla Chattar, New Market, Dhanmondi (Road 27), Mirpur 10 roundabout, Mohakhali, Sutrapur, Doyaganj truck stand, Farmgate and Chawkbazar in Lalbagh.

Besides, leaders and activists of the opposition parties will gather at different entry points to the capital at Kachpur, Abdullahpur, Savar and Tongi.

In divisional headquarters and

district towns, the opposition will block the motorways, railways and waterways during the demonstration hours.

Sources said leaders and activists of the opposition coalition will be posted at Chittagong, Sylhet, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Khulna, Ishwardi, and Akhaura railway stations to halt the movement of trains.

Upazila units of the opposition parties will cut off communications with the district headquarters while the district units will try to snap links between the capital and the divisional headquarters.

District unit activists of the opposition will gather on the roads and highways near district bus terminals to stop road communications, opposition leaders said.

Leader of the Opposition also AL President Sheikh Hasina had announced the programme ending a 36-hour countrywide hartal on June 14. Earlier, the opposition camp had observed programmes to besiege the capital and the EC

Secretariat, demanding reforms in the caretaker government and electoral systems as well as ouster of the CEC and two controversially appointed election commissioners.

Leaders of the 14-party coalition held a series of meetings in the last few days with different organisations of transport owners and workers seeking their support for today's blockade.

The 14-party line up held a preparatory meeting yesterday at the Gono Forum office in the capital.

Organising Secretary of Gono Forum Central Committee Mostafa Mohsin Montu presided over the meeting, which was addressed among others by Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, general secretary of Dhaka city Awami League also co-ordinator of the city unit of 14-party coalition, and Workers Party leader Mostafa Alamgir Ratan.