

THREAT FROM NORTH KOREA

US ready to offer Japan 'full range' of deterrence

AFP, Tokyo

The United States is ready to offer the "full range" of its security commitments to Japan in light of the threat from North Korea, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said here yesterday.

"The US has the will and the capability to meet the full range, and I underscore, full range of its deterrent and security commitments to Japan," Rice told reporters after talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso.

"I want to make sure that everybody understands that the US will fully act on our defense obligations under the mutual defense treaty," Rice said.

Her remarks came amid calls in

Japan for debate on the long-taboo option of developing nuclear weapons after North Korea said last week it had tested its first-ever atom bomb.

Aso reaffirmed that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government had no plans to go nuclear.

"Now as the government we are in no position to make arrangements for nuclear weapons," Aso said.

"Secretary Rice told me that, under the Japan-US security treaty, the US commitment to defend Japan is maintained under all circumstances," Aso said.

Japan's foreign minister told Rice yesterday that the world must not close the door on diplomacy with North Korea, an official said.

Japan has strongly backed the US push to enforce sanctions on North Korea, which last week said it tested its first atom bomb.

But Aso, meeting with Rice at the start of her four-nation tour of North Korea's neighbors, said that diplomacy remained the goal.

"The objective is not sanctions in themselves -- it's an end to its nuclear program," Aso told Rice, as quoted by a Japanese foreign ministry official present at the talks.

"So we should keep open the window of dialogue and call for the unconditional resumption of six-party talks," Aso was quoted as saying.

Pakistan to hang Briton during royal couple's visit

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan is due to hang a British national on November 1, coinciding with a planned visit by Britain's Prince Charles and his wife Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, officials said yesterday.

Mirza Tahir Hussain, 36, from Leeds in northern England, has spent half his life in a Pakistani jail fighting a death sentence for killing a taxi driver.

The decision on his fate follows three stays of execution ordered by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and comes despite a vocal campaign by Hussain's family to save his life.

"Mirza Tahir Hussain's new execution date is November 1," an official at Adiala Prison in Rawalpindi, a garrison city adjoining the capital Islamabad, told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"The third extension given to him by the president was until October 1. Before that the jail authorities wrote a letter to the court seeking orders to hang the convict on expiry of the stay," the official added.

"The court issued an order last week fixing the execution on November 1, as there are no executions in Ramadan (the Muslim holy month of fasting)," he said.

A spokesman for the British High Commission (embassy) in Islamabad confirmed that Pakistani authorities had given them notice of the new execution date.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair urged Pervez Musharraf yesterday to intervene again to halt the hanging of a British national, scheduled during an upcoming royal visit.

Blair warned of "very serious" consequences if the execution of Mirza Tahir Hussain were to go ahead on November 1.

"I hope even at this stage that there is an intervention to ensure this does not take place. I think it would be very serious if it does," Blair said, when asked about the case in the House of Commons.

He noted that he had made a personal representation over the case to Musharraf during a recent visit to London by the Pakistani leader.

Freed Islamist says Pak govt can't gag him

AFP, Lahore

The former head of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba Kashmiri militant group pledged to keep "spreading the message of Allah" after he was freed from detention, his spokesman said yesterday.

Hafez Mohammad Saeed was released late Tuesday on the orders of a high court judge in the eastern city of Lahore after spending nearly three months interned by Pakistani authorities.

Supporters chanted "God is great" after Saeed left a guest house where he had been held in Sekhupura, near Lahore, said Yahya Mujahid, a spokesman for his controversial new Islamic charity Jamaat-ud-Dawa.

"Authorities have released Hafez Saeed from a rest house which was declared a sub-jail," spokesman Mujahid said, adding that Saeed reached his home in Lahore yesterday.

"He is in good health and fasting (for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan) and told the people gathered to welcome him that he was well and in high spirits," he added.

He quoted Saeed as telling supporters immediately after his release: "Detention and arrest cannot stop me from spreading the message of Allah."

Saeed was placed under house arrest in Lahore on August 9, shortly after Indian officials said Lashkar-e-Taiba had suspected links with July's serial train blasts in Mumbai, which killed 186 people.

Nepal Maoists to keep guns until monarchy abolished

AFP, Bhaktapur

Nepal's Maoist rebels are determined to see the back of the monarchy and are unlikely to give up their weapons until the king has gone for good, the Maoist second-in-command has told AFP.

"The king is down but not out. He has all the privileges, he has all the money, billions of dollars... The army is still loyal to him," Baburam Bhattarai said in an interview on Tuesday.

"There is tremendous pressure from the masses of the people not to lay down the arms until and unless the feudal system and the monarchy is abolished."

King Gyanendra was forced to end 14-months of direct rule in April after three weeks of pro-democracy pro-



Baburam Bhattarai

tests led by political parties and the rebels.

Since restoring parliament in April, the new government has stripped the king of most of his powers, including his status as supreme army com-

mander.

Massive restructuring of the former Royal Nepal Army, a 90,000-strong force traditionally loyal to the monarch, is essential, Bhattarai said.

"The main institution buttressing and supporting the monarchy is the royal army. It is still feudalistic, and it is still loyal to the monarchy and against democracy," said the former civil engineer turned revolutionary.

The Maoists have proposed three options on the future of the monarchy. The first is for the impoverished Himalayan nation to be immediately declared a republic, and the second option is a referendum on the 238-year-old monarchy.

If neither of these two options are enacted, the rebels will refuse to join the interim government, but would support

the holding of elections to a body that will rewrite Nepal's constitution permanently, a key rebel demand.

"If you don't nationalise his property and if you don't restructure the army, he won't be finished. Money and guns are the main means of his power," Bhattarai said.

In June, the government agreed to let the rebels join an interim government, but differences over arms management and the role of the monarchy have delayed the power-sharing deal.

Sunday saw a fresh round of high-level peace talks end in Kathmandu with no conclusion, and no date set for the next round, aimed at ending the insurgency that has killed at least 12,500 people since 1996.

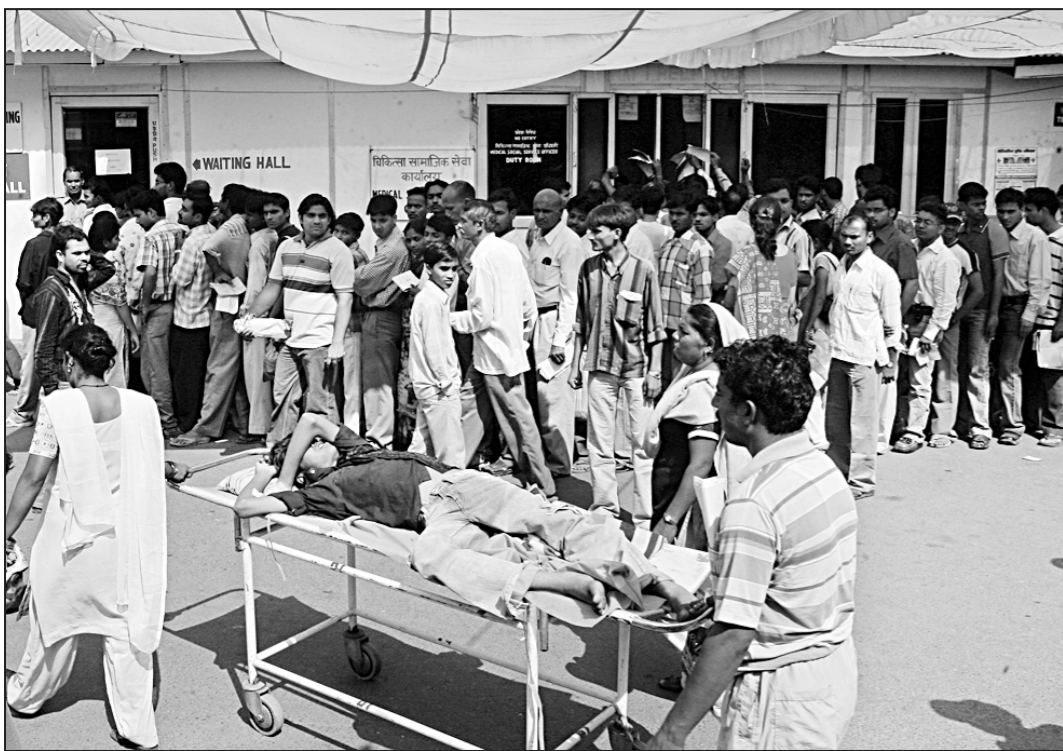


PHOTO: AFP

A suspected dengue patient is brought for treatment to a screening ward as people queue to have their blood tested at a hospital in New Delhi. Four more people died in the capital yesterday raising the death toll across India to 107.

Andromeda had collided with another galaxy

Riddle about bizarre shape solved

AFP, London

A two-decade-long riddle about the bizarre shape of the Milky Way's nearest spiral-shaped galaxy, Andromeda, has been solved, says a study to be published today in Nature, the weekly British science journal.

Instead of having the flat plane and outflung arms that are the hallmarks of a mature spiral galaxy, Andromeda has a warped plane and several rather chaotic, overlapping outer rings, like ripples of stars.

The reason, according to an international team of astronomers: Andromeda suffered a head-on collision with a smaller galaxy some 210 million years ago.

The evidence comes from infrared images of Andromeda taken by the orbiting Spitzer Space Telescope, and these reveal a picture quite different to that seen by the naked eye.

It shows a previously-hidden, tilted second ring that protrudes from the heart of the galaxy. This ring is likely to be the shockwave of gas and dust from a colossal collision.

The theory has been put to the test in a computer simulation. It suggests that a "dwarf" galaxy, M32, was the likely impactor, driving straight into the heart of Andromeda, also called M31, to create a behemoth of a trillion stars.

"While head-on collisions may

have been common in the early Universe, only a handful are known nearby," says the paper, lead-authored by David Block of the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa.

"The discovery of one in our near-neighbour M31 affords the unique opportunity of studying such a collision at unprecedented spatial resolution."

Andromeda, first spotted as "a little cloud" by the Persian astronomer Abd-al-Rahman Al Sufi in 964, is heading our way.

However, the two galaxies are more than two million light years apart and the collision will take some time -- between three and six billion years from now, according to various estimates.