

China moves to ease nuke tension

Envoy sent to N Korea

REUTERS, Seoul

China said yesterday it had sent a special envoy to Pyongyang in an apparent bid to de-escalate tension over North Korea's nuclear test, as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a crisis trip through North Asia.

Beijing said that Tang Jiaxuan, a state councillor and former foreign minister, had delivered a message to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il from the communist state's strongest backer.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said North Korea's October 9 underground nuclear test, which brought worldwide condemnation and UN sanctions, was discussed at the meeting.

He gave no details of the message delivered from President Hu Jintao during the visit of "major significance."

However, a senior US official travelling with Rice to Seoul from

Tokyo said the Chinese envoy had gone to North Korea to tell the reclusive communist state not to conduct another test.

"I'm pretty convinced that the Chinese will have a very strong message about future tests," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

Tang arrived in Pyongyang on Wednesday with Chinese Vice Foreign Ministers Dai Bingguo and Wu Dawei, who is also China's chief negotiator to long-stalled the six-party talks to end North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

The US official said Rice would urge South Korea to fully implement the UN resolution passed last weekend imposing financial and weapons sanctions against North Korea.

But in Beijing, her next stop, spokesman Liu warned against "wilfully" expanding the sanctions. "Sanctions are a signal, not the goal," he told a news conference.



PHOTO: AFP

A convoy of Israeli army tanks and bulldozers rolls into the Gaza Strip after crossing the border near the southern Israeli Kibbutz of Mefalsim yesterday. Hundreds of Israeli soldiers are reported operating up to four kilometres inside Palestinian territory on the outskirts of the southern Palestinian border town of Rafah, in an offensive the army said had so far uncovered nine tunnels used by Palestinian militants to smuggle in arms from Egypt.

Britain now top target of al-Qaeda

AFP, London

Britain is the top target of the al-Qaeda terrorist network, which now presents a bigger threat than ever before, The Guardian reported yesterday.

Citing unnamed anti-terrorism chiefs, the newspaper said that al-Qaeda had regrouped and recovered its organisation in Pakistan, despite a more-than-four-year campaign by a US-led coalition to wipe out the network.

In that time, the newspaper reported, the terror organisation has become a more coherent network with a regular supply of volunteers.

Islamic extremists "viewed 7/7 (the July 7, 2005 suicide attacks on London's transport network) as just the beginning," an unnamed senior source said.

"al-Qaeda sees the UK as a massive opportunity to cause loss of life and embarrassment to the authorities," the source continued.

Meanwhile, another unnamed source told the daily: "Britain is sitting

at the receiving end of an al-Qaeda campaign."

Britain is seen as an easier threat for al-Qaeda than many other countries because of its historic links with Pakistan, with tens of thousands of travellers between the two countries each year, the newspaper reported.

The structure of the terror network has also changed, anti-terror chiefs claim, to a more hierarchical system with greater organisation and inter-linkage, from a threat that was mainly comprised of small groups which shared the same philosophy but were largely self-taught and lacked structure.

"There is a hierarchy within each cell with a very tightly run command and control," an unnamed counter-terrorism source said.

"It's all about building up these recruits to consider themselves as Muslim 'patriots' and encouraging them to make the leap and ask themselves 'This is how the west treats Muslims, what are we going to do about it?'," another unnamed source told The Guardian.

Bush for first time acknowledges Iraq-Vietnam war comparison

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush has for the first time acknowledged a possible parallel between the raging violence in Iraq and the Vietnam War.

But the White House also affirmed that it has no plan to reassess its strategy in the war-ravaged country, despite a surge in US casualties there and unrelenting sectarian bloodshed.

Bush was asked in an ABC News interview late Wednesday if he agreed with a New York Times columnist's comparison of the strife in Iraq with the Tet Offensive, which is considered a key turning point in the US war in Vietnam.

"He could be right," Bush said. "There's certainly a stepped-up level of violence."

Bush said insurgents were trying "to inflict enough damage that we'd leave."

"First of all, al-Qaeda is still very active in Iraq. They are dangerous. They are lethal. They are trying to not only kill American troops, but they're trying to foment sectarian violence," he said.

"They believe that if they can create enough chaos, the American people will grow sick and tired of the Iraq effort and will cause (the) government to withdraw," Bush said.

Iraqi troops ready for full security role by late 2007: Minister

AFP, Canberra

Iraq's newly-minted army will be ready to take over the security of the war-torn state from US and allied troops by late next year or early 2008, Iraq's oil minister said in Australia Thursday.

However, the Australian government, under growing pressure to pull out its troops soon, said the timetable was "optimistic", and pledged to keep forces in Iraq until the Iraqi military could handle security by itself.

During the first visit to the country by a member of the US-backed Iraqi cabinet, Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani said it would not take years for foreign troops to be able to withdraw from the conflict.

"Almost half of the country now is almost totally under the control of the Iraqi forces," he told reporters, as violence escalated further in Iraq's civil war.

"The other half, we are planning by the end of 2007, perhaps 2008, to have sufficiently trained and equipped Iraqi forces to take over responsibility."

But Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, described Shahristani's prediction of a timetable for Iraqi forces to take full control of their country as "optimistic".

"The sooner they're able to do it the better, of course," he told the

Australian Associated Press.

"We're not putting a timeframe on it, we're just going to depend on how the capabilities of the Iraqi troops develop."

Governments, including in the United States, Britain and Australia, are coming under growing pressure to pull out of Iraq.

"Until we finish building our own forces, we expect multinational forces to stay and help in building the Iraqi forces," the Iraqi minister said in the Australian capital.

Australia, which has closely allied itself with the US war against terror, has 1,300 troops in and near Iraq, but Canberra is coming under mounting pressure to change its stance on the US-led occupation.

Prime Minister John Howard faced an opposition-tabled censure motion in parliament Wednesday, lashing him for bringing Australia into the war three years ago, just as the US is reportedly examining exit strategies.

Howard took a verbal beating during the debate of the motion, which was defeated along party lines, but insisted that a quick coalition withdrawal from Iraq would give a propaganda boost to global terrorist recruitment.