

Bush-Kerry rivalry revived

AFP, Washington

An embarrassing faux pas by 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry sparked President George W Bush's Republicans yesterday, six days before key Congressional elections.

But it appeared unlikely to turn the tide against Kerry's Democrats, who continue to ride bad news from Iraq toward likely victory in the midterm polls on November 7.

An energised Bush went on the attack Tuesday after Senator Kerry's comments that Americans who neglect their education would "get stuck in Iraq", with the president - who defeated Kerry in the bitter 2004 race - saying his erstwhile opponent had insulted US soldiers.

"The senator's suggestion that the men and women of our military are somehow uneducated is insulting and it is shameful," Bush said at a raucous Republican rally in Georgia.

No quick deal in sight on N Korea nuke row

REUTERS, Seoul

Three weeks after its nuclear test, North Korea said on Wednesday it was returning to six-party talks because Washington had agreed to discuss the financial sanctions Pyongyang says drove it from the negotiating table to start with.

But analysts warned against expecting any quick resolution to talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear programmes that Pyongyang has spurned for the past year because of the tough US crackdown on its offshore funds.

"The DPRK (North Korea) decided to return to the six-party talks on the premise that the issue of lifting financial sanctions will be discussed and settled between the DPRK and the US within the frame-

work of the six-party talks," said a Foreign Ministry spokesman cited by the official KCNA news agency.

The last round of talks between the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia and the United States broke off in November 2005 after Washington cut Pyongyang's access to the world financial system to punish it for illicit activities such as counterfeiting.

The KCNA report confirmed an announcement in Beijing the previous day of a talks resumption deal reached after seven hours of talks between North Korea, US and Chinese officials.

Japan and the United States, advocates of tough punitive measures against the North after its October 9 nuclear test, both said that sanctions over the test should

remain. Though welcoming the decision, President Bush said he would send teams to Asia to ensure UN Security Council sanctions were enforced on the budding nuclear power.

But South Korea's point man for the North said Seoul, which has taken a much softer line with Pyongyang, would now consider resuming regular food aid to the North, which Seoul suspended in a unilateral gesture after the test blast.

Analysts said North Korea had agreed to return to the talks in part over fears of the impact of a slew of international sanctions, especially those threatened by China, the closest it has to an ally and on which it relies heavily to prop up its impoverished economy.

But the analysts said fresh talks did not mean a change of heart in Pyongyang.

"It really costs them nothing to come back to the table ... I think we have to have very low expectations given the fundamental distrust that exists," said Peter Beck, a Korean affairs expert with the International Crisis Group in Seoul.

He said the imminent US congressional elections, with Bush facing criticism for his North Korea policy, also played a role.

"You are certainly going to make a better impression with the Bush administration if you do it (announce a return to the talks) a week before a close and hard-fought election than a week after an embarrassing defeat."

Muslim mother, 4 daughters die in UK fire

BBC ONLINE, London

A mother and her four daughters, aged from under one to 16 years old, have died in a house fire in Lancashire.

The bodies of Caneze Riaz, 39, and her daughters Sairah, 16, Sophia, 15, Alicia, 10, and three-year-old Hannah were found in the early hours.

Firefighters broke into a bay window of the end terrace house in Tremellen Street, Accrington.

The girls' father, Mohammed Riaz, was taken to hospital where he is in a critical condition.

He had to be resuscitated by a firefighter at the scene and is being treated in Wythenshawe Hospital burns unit.

Iraq issues veiled threat to 'plotting' neighbours

40 Shias kidnapped, 8 slain in fresh attacks

AFP, AP, Kuwait City

A senior Iraqi security official issued a veiled threat Tuesday to neighbouring countries whom he accused of sponsoring insurgents who carry out deadly attacks.

"We don't want to send booby-trapped cars for the ones that are sent to us. We are capable of that but this is not the nature of the new Iraq," national security advisor Muwafaq al-Rubaie told reporters in neighbouring Kuwait.

"Neighbours are sending death vehicles, terrorists, financial and logistical support and also plotting,"

the Shia politician said, declining to point the finger at any particular country.

"We will give them more time to reconsider their calculations ... We don't want to open fire on any country ... but Iraq's patience has a limit," he added on the sidelines of an Iraq donors' conference.

A senior official from a neighbouring country will visit Iraq in the next few weeks to discuss a political solution, Rubaie added without elaborating.

Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh, a Kurdish politician, later pointed the finger at Syria and called

on it to do more to stop the infiltration of "terrorists" across the border.

Meanwhile, more than 40 Shias were abducted along a notoriously dangerous highway just north of Baghdad, police said yesterday, and the death toll from a suicide bombing at a wedding party rose to 23, including nine children.

At least eight other people were either found dead or slain in new attacks Wednesday, including one person killed in a car bomb attack in Baghdad's central market, which wounded five others, police Lt. Ali Hassan said. The death toll in the market attack was likely to rise, he said.

AIRSTRIKE ON MADRASA Pak troops seal off troubled town

AFP, Khar

Pakistani troops yesterday sealed off a troubled frontier zone amid a third day of tensions over a deadly air raid on an Islamic school that was visited by al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The clampdown came despite calls by a human rights group for an independent investigation into claims that the 80 people who were killed in the attack in the troubled Bajaur region on Monday were all students and teachers.

Blair still on the rack on Iraq war probe

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced fresh pressure Wednesday to hold a new inquiry into the Iraq war despite winning a crunch vote, after a key minister suggested a probe will be held after all.

Blair's government survived a potentially damaging vote late Tuesday by 298 votes to 273 on whether he should order an immediate inquiry into how Britain joined the US-led March 2003 invasion.



PHOTO: AFP
A crowd of Sri Lankans shout and hold photographs of disappeared family members during a demonstration organised by the Committee for Investigation of the Disappeared in Colombo yesterday. The conflict in Sri Lanka is Asia's longest and bloodiest separatist war, claiming more than 60,000 lives since the LTTE launched its bid for Tamil independence in 1972.

Lanka accuses Tigers of breaching truce

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military yesterday accused Tamil Tiger rebels of carrying out artillery and mortar attacks against troop camps in the east of the island, despite a pledge to stick to a truce.

A military spokesman said a government soldier was hurt overnight Tuesday in three hours of strikes by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on positions at Kajuwatta, Mankerni and Mahindapura near ceasefire lines.

"The LTTE started firing mortars and shells from Kathiraveli in the

night," Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe said, adding sporadic fire continued through Wednesday morning.

"This is even after the LTTE pledged in Geneva that they would abide by the ceasefire," he added, referring to failed Norwegian-brokered peace talks in Switzerland at the weekend aimed at restoring a 2002 ceasefire agreement.

Samarasinghe said airforce Kfir jets had conducted a retaliatory raid on a rebel camp from where the mortar fire had originated.

"They were successful in hitting the LTTE camp", Samarasinghe

said. Both sides have continued to fight it out since the talks. At least five people were killed and six others injured on Tuesday in separate clashes in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan navy also said it destroyed a trawler off the northern coast suspected of smuggling arms to the rebels, and said at least five rebels were killed in the attack.

Tamil Tigers have in turn accused the government of building up its forces in the north, even as the face-to-face talks were progressing.

Rice urges major powers to speed up Iran sanction

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called her major power counterparts Tuesday in a bid to spur tough negotiations at the United Nations over a sanctions resolution against Iran, a senior US official said.

Rice urged the foreign ministers from the other permanent UN Security Council members -- Britain, China, France and Russia -

- to overcome the differences that have prevented agreement on the sanctions package, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said.

"She put forward the proposal that we should try to work extremely hard to get that resolution passed as quickly as possible," Burns said.

"We are working very hard at the UN Security Council to push for a resolution," he said.

Iran faces the sanctions after rejecting an earlier UN resolution demanding it freeze a uranium enrichment programme many fear is a cover for developing nuclear weapons.

Earlier another senior US official said North Korea's sudden decision Tuesday to give up its nuclear arsenal in the face of UN sanctions had provided a model for confronting Iran's uranium programme.

Swapping guns for brooms

Maoists clean up Kathmandu in charm offensive

AFP, Kathmandu

Swapping guns for brooms, hundreds of rebel Maoists have started a clean-up campaign in Nepal's polluted and often filthy capital in a bid to gain wider respectability.

"The garbage problem in the city had remained ignored. The government authorities and concerned bodies were ineffective in dealing the issue, that's why we took the initiative," said Hisila Yami, a rebel who is leading the anti-litter campaign.

Around 500 rebel cadres are involved in the programme, with Kathmandu Metropolitan City authorities providing the Maoists with vehicles, brooms and shovels, said Yami, wife of the Maoist second-in-command Baburam Bhattarai.

Wearing a red and white sash reading "Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) Volunteer", rebel cadre Ashok collected garbage from a

roadside and placed it in a basket in a busy suburb of Nepal on Wednesday morning.

"We want to create awareness among people about garbage management," he said.

"Besides, being involved in community service will improve our image as we are not the same force that we used to be during the insurgency period," said Ashok, who like many rebels goes by only one name.

The campaign will likely be extended, said Yami, the woman in charge of the project.

"Initially, we started it on Tuesday as a four-day campaign but people have asked us to clean up their respective areas so we might extend it for a couple of days," said Yami.

The rebel leader said that they were now concentrating on social activities as the political situation in the country was gradually improving.

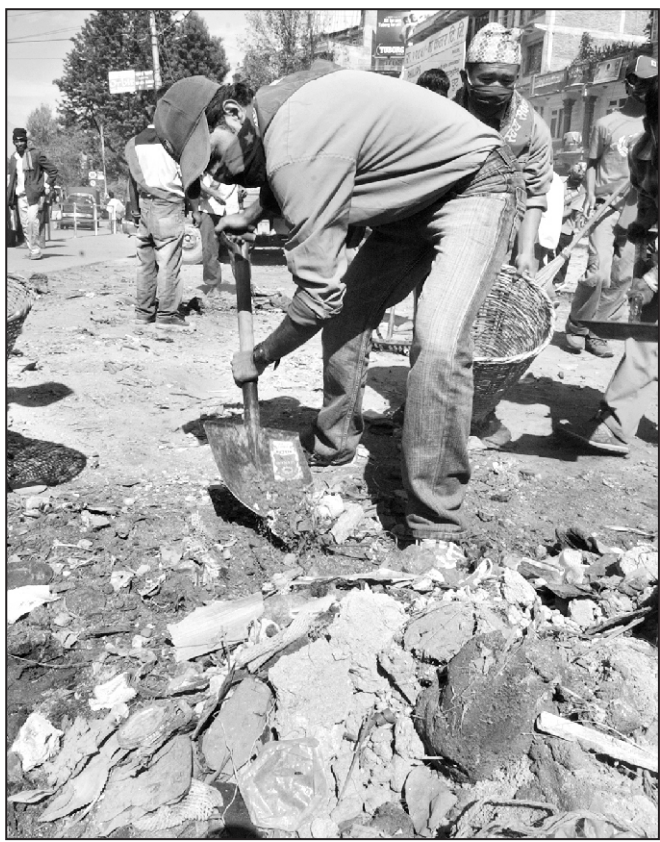


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese Maoists take part in a clean up campaign in Kathmandu yesterday. Swapping guns for brooms and shovels, hundreds of rebel Maoists have started a clean-up campaign in Nepal's polluted and often filthy capital as part of their bid to gain wider respectability.