

## Transport ministers pledge cut in Asian road crash deaths

AFP, Busan

Asian transport ministers vowed yesterday to drastically cut road deaths in the region, which the United Nations holds responsible for half of the world's traffic fatalities.

The ministers from 41 Asia-Pacific nations adopted a declaration on improving road safety aimed at slashing the number of deaths by 600,000 over the next nine years.

The commitment came at the end of a two-day ministerial meeting on transport, organised by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in the southern port of Busan.

UNESCAP estimates that last year 440,000 people died and at least two million were injured on roads in the Asia-Pacific region although it has only one in five of the world's motor vehicles.

The ministers expressed concern that "about half of all road traffic fatalities and injuries worldwide occur in the Asian and Pacific region" in a declaration issued at the Busan meeting.

The ministers "resolve to save 600,000 lives and to prevent a commensurate number of serious injuries on the roads of Asia and the Pacific over the period 2007 to 2015", read the declaration.

Asia-Pacific states have submitted their own road safety targets to meet the regional goal, UNESCAP officials said.

"The peer pressure, we believe, will help promote this cooperational activity," said Barry Cable, head of UNESCAP's Transport and Tourism Division.

The Bangkok-based UN body estimates that by 2020, unless something is done, two-thirds of the

world's road deaths will be in the Asia-Pacific region.

Traffic accidents are the second largest cause of death for young people -- mostly young men -- aged between five and 29 globally, according to the World Health Organisation.

Road fatalities "are preventable by governments giving stronger political commitment and implementing more effective policies," UNESCAP chief Kim Hak-Su said in his message to the forum.

Road safety has been a key issue of concern since the UN-backed Asian Highway network project came into force in 2005 to connect all major trunk roads in the Asia-Pacific region.

## UN urges Israel to end flights over Lebanon

REUTERS, United Nations

The United Nations renewed a plea to Israel on Friday to stop violating Lebanese airspace with surveillance flights the Jewish state insists are needed to guard against arms smuggling from Syria.

The United Nations says such flights, conducted regularly by Israeli warplanes for years, are a clear violation of the ceasefire resolution adopted by the UN Security Council in August to end the 34-day Israel-Hezbollah war.

"The resolution is clear," UN chief spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

"We have asked them to cease these violations," Dujarric said, adding that strong UN protests were filed each time they occurred.

The French Foreign Ministry said earlier on Friday that it hoped the United States, Israel's closest ally, would put pressure on Israel to end the flights after French peacekeepers this week nearly launched missiles at Israeli jets flying in an attack mode over their outpost.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas lights a candle on the tombstone of late leader Yasser Arafat in the West Bank city of Ramallah marking his second death anniversary yesterday.

## Terror tops Indo-Pak talks agenda

AFP, New Delhi

Curbing terrorism will top the agenda in India's peace talks with Pakistan that were put on hold after July's deadly attacks on commuter trains in Mumbai, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee said.

Top diplomats of the nuclear-armed rivals are due to meet in New Delhi on Tuesday for the first time since the dialogue was suspended after the train bombings in Mumbai, India's financial hub, that killed 186 people and wounded more than 800.

India blamed Pakistan's military spy agency of masterminding the attack, a charge rejected by Islamabad.

"Terrorism is an important issue because earlier talks were suspended because of the public outrage after Mumbai blasts," Mukherjee told reporters in the Indian capital late Friday.

"I would like that they should stick to (previous) assurances (to check militants) which they have given," Mukherjee said.

The South Asian rivals agreed to set up an anti-terrorism cooperation

mechanism when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf on the sidelines of a summit in Cuba in September.

Mukherjee said the two sides would discuss the setting up of the mechanism during the dialogue between Indian foreign secretary Shivshankar Menon and his Pakistani counterpart Riaz Mohammad Khan.

A top US official said in New Delhi on Friday that militant outfits responsible for attacks in India had "origins" in Pakistan.

"Many of the links that are talked about go back to their origin and ties in Pakistan," US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher told reporters.

"We all need to work together against terrorism through effective actions so that people in India do not suffer from these blasts," he said.

Analysts said that Boucher's statement would put pressure on Islamabad amid growing international concern over Pakistan's links with militants.



PHOTO: AFP

Top UN official Ibrahim Gambari (3L) posing with unidentified National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders for discussions at the United Nations office in Yangon yesterday. Gambari, on a mission to press military-run Myanmar for democratic reform, held a meeting with detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi for the second time this year.

## UN envoy meets Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

Top UN official Ibrahim Gambari, on a four-day visit to press military-run Myanmar for democratic reform, met detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday for the second time this year.

"They met at the state guest house for about one hour," an information ministry source said, adding the meeting ended at around 6:15 pm (1145 GMT).

It was their second meeting following Gambari's previous visit to the isolated Southeast Asian nation in May, and allowed the 61-year-old Nobel peace laureate to leave her house for the first time since the May 20 meeting.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest in Yangon for most of the past 17 years, was accompanied by national police chief Brigadier General Khin Yee on her way to and from the state guest house, the source said.

Apart from her live-in maid, the leader of opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) is allowed no contact with the outside world, except for once-a-month visits from her doctor, Tin Myo Win.

Ahead of the meeting, Gambari, an emissary of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, flew to

Myanmar's new administrative capital, Nay Pyi Taw, some 350 kilometers (217 miles) north of Yangon, and held talks with junta leader Than Shwe, a senior information ministry official said.

The UN envoy also met with seven senior NLD members at the UN Development Program's office in Yangon, NLD sources said.

"Our senior members told Mr Gambari that we wanted a dialogue (with the military government) to achieve national reconciliation," said NLD spokesman Myint Thein.

"We also told him that we continued to press for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners," he said. The United Nations has estimated there are some 1,100 political prisoners in Myanmar.

When the junta allowed Gambari to see the pro-democracy leader in May, the Nigerian diplomat became the only foreigner allowed to see her in more than two years, raising hopes that the military government might finally set her free.

But just a week after the surprise meeting, the junta extended her house arrest for another year.

## Democrats now face test of capability to govern after win

AFP, Washington

Victorious Democrats, emerging from 12 years in the US political wilderness, now have two years to demonstrate their capacity to govern and position themselves for a wide-open race for the White House.

"The election's over. It's time for a change," said Democrat Harry Reid, the presumed leader of the incoming US Senate, minutes after confirmation that his party secured a majority in both chambers of Congress in Tuesday's vote.

But apart from a handful of modest proposals expected to be adopted when the Democrats take over in January, including raising the minimum wage, the outlines of a Democratic era on Capitol Hill remain unclear.

The president's veto power will impose strict limits on the Democrats and the dominant issue of the election campaign -- the Iraq war -- rests almost entirely under the authority of the Republican com-

mander-in-chief, President George W. Bush.

The first meetings between Bush and his new partners on Thursday and Friday were polite public rituals and clearly not the time for Democrats to set out a plan of action.

The two sides spoke "not in terms of details of what we would support or what he would support," said Steny Hoyer, a Democrat in the House of Representatives, who attended the post-election meeting at the White House.

Instead, the talks focused on Bush's "willingness and eagerness to work with us on passing legislation that we could agree on" while the president acknowledged there would be disagreements, citing funding for embryonic stem cell research as an example, Hoyer said on Fox television.

Bush said on Wednesday that he hoped for an agreement with the next Congress to raise the minimum wage without hurting small businesses.

## Move to regain contact with Mars probe

AP, Los Angeles

Nasa's Mars Global Surveyor has been out of contact with Earth for nearly a week and engineers tried Friday to re-establish communication with the craft, which may be showing its age after 10 years in space.

The space agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena lost contact with the probe for two days last week, then received a weak carrier signal with no data on Sunday. Since then, Surveyor has not confirmed receiving a command to point one of its transmitters to Earth, project manager Tom Thorpe said.

The Global Surveyor was launched on Nov. 7, 1996, to systematically map Mars while orbiting the Red Planet. It has operated longer than the other Martian exploration craft.

Carrying a powerful camera that has returned thousands of images, the spacecraft has discovered features suggesting water once flowed on the desert world, and it has looked at potential landing sites for future exploration.

## Iran vows to hit back if Israel attacks

AFP, Tehran

Iran's armed forces yesterday vowed to hit back against any military strike after a top Israeli official refused to rule out attacking the Islamic republic over its disputed nuclear programme.

"The armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran will firmly respond to any military and threatening move," Brigadier General Ali Fazli, spokesman for Iran's latest round of 10-day war games, told state television.

"The Iranian armed forces, which realise the different threats, have the capacity and capability to confront them," he added.

Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh had told the Jerusalem Post on Friday he considered military action against Iran as a "last resort. But even the last resort is sometimes the only resort."

His comments were seen as the clearest statement yet by an Israeli official that military strikes against Iran over its refusal to halt sensitive

nuclear activities were not excluded.

"The enemies of the Islamic republic are too weak and too abject to be a threat for a powerful Iran," added Fazli, who did not specify what the nature of Iran's response would be.

Iran has been showing off its military prowess in recent days in the 10-day "Great Prophet II" war games, which have seen its fire its Shahab-3 longer range missile for the first time in manoeuvres and test-fire new weaponry.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, complained to Secretary General Kofi Annan and the Security Council over Israel's "threats" on Friday following the comments by Sneh.

"The letter, underlining threats from Sneh and other Israeli officials, regards these statements as illegal, ridiculous and a sign of the Zionist regime's criminal policies and terrorist intentions," the IRNA state agency said.

## UN asks Nepal govt, Maoists to put focus on human rights now

REUTERS, Kathmandu

The United Nations urged Nepal's multi-party government and Maoist rebels yesterday to start focusing on protecting human rights following their landmark power sharing agreement this week.

Rights groups accuse both rebels and security forces of human rights violations including killings, torture, rape and kidnappings during a decade of Maoist insurgency that killed more than 13,000 people.

Three days ago, the guerrillas agreed to place their weapons under UN supervision and share power. They also agreed to form a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate human rights abuses committed by both sides during the insurrection.

"This agreement sets the founda-

tion for a peace process and democratic transition in which the protection and promotion of the human rights of all Nepalis must be central," Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a statement.

"It is essential that the parties translate their commitments into meaningful actions to end abuses."

Arbour called for prosecution of serious human rights violations so that community trust is restored in the rule of law and future abuses are prevented.

The rebels, who fought to bring down the monarchy, have been accused by the UN of parallel "law enforcement activities". International media watchdog Reporters Without Borders has accused the Maoists of remaining intolerant of media criticism.