

INDO-US NUKE DEAL

Bush hopeful about Congress nod

AFP, Singapore

US President George W Bush told Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh by telephone yesterday that he was "hopeful" the US Congress could soon pass the US-India nuclear deal, the White House said.

"President Bush had a good conversation with Indian Prime Minister Singh. The president reiterated his support for passage of the US-India civilian nuclear deal," said national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

"The president told the prime minister he was hopeful Congress will move forward with the measure and he is encouraged" by a leading Republican senator's comments "that the Senate will act soon," he said.

"The prime minister expressed appreciation for President Bush's commitment to the passage of the legislation," a statement from Singh's office said.

During the telephone conversation, Singh raised India's concerns over the fate of the accord after the Democrats gained control of both houses of the US Congress this month in the midterm polls.

The prime minister "hoped that

the bill in its final form will accommodate India's stated concerns", the statement said.

The two leaders also "expressed satisfaction at the state of bilateral relations between Indian and the United States", the statement added.

The nuclear agreement had been clinched during Bush's visit to New Delhi in March.

The US House of Representatives gave its thumbs-up to the deal in July but a Senate vote had been delayed due to November 7 elections that resulted in Democratic control of both chambers in the new Congress from January.

It is unclear how the current Republican-controlled Senate would vote on it this week even though leaders of both Republican and Democratic parties have called for its approval.

On Wednesday, the US Senate began debating the agreement under which India, a non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), would be allowed access to long-denied civilian nuclear technology in return for placing its atomic reactors under global safeguards.

Lanka president asks Tigers to resume talks

British envoy holds talks with rebels

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president appealed to Tiger rebels yesterday to resume talks to end bloodshed on the island as a British envoy met with the guerrillas to try to jumpstart stalled peace efforts.

President Mahinda Rajapakse asked the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to return to the negotiating table during a speech to parliament on the 2007 budget, which projects a 45 percent hike in defence spending next year.

"We are deeply committed to peace... We are ready to consider all reasonable solutions to the minority issues, Rajapakse said.

"Only the LTTE has not accepted this so far. I invite them to lay down arms and join the democratic system, enter talks," he said.

Rajapakse told parliament he was grateful to the international community for trying to revive the peace process and end a spiral of violence since he came to power in November last year.

There was no immediate

response by the Tigers to the president's call.

Rajapakse's appeal came as British MP Paul Murphy, an envoy of British premier Tony Blair, began talks with separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas at the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi, diplomats said.

Earlier in the day, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) met the president in Colombo to discuss latest developments in the conflict.

The TNA consists of legislators who have never taken up arms but supports the political line of the Tigers.

Rajapakse has asked British police to help investigate last week's

assassination of TNA legislator Nadarajah Raviraj, who was gunned down on a highway here last Friday.

The president told parliament that the LTTE resumed hostilities a few days after he became president a year ago and blunted his economic development programme for the Indian Ocean island of 19.5 million people.

"A few days after I became president, they resumed hostile activities," he said in his speech.

Official figures show that more than 3,300 people have been killed in the past year despite a truce in place since February 2002.



Sri Lankan Tamil residents buy rationed essentials from a government store in Jaffna in the northern Sri Lankan peninsula on Nov 14. The closure of the main land access to the Jaffna peninsula in mid August has led to virtual siege conditions for the 600,000 civilians in the region who face severe hardships.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepali Maoists, govt delay deal signing

AFP, Kathmandu

The signing of a historic peace accord to end a decade of bloody civil war in Nepal was postponed yesterday as the government and Maoist rebels said they needed more time to finalise the document.

Neither side would enter into detail about the issues holding up the signing, but both insisted the problems were "minor" and that the deal would still be inked.

"Both sides agreed to extend the deadline as there are some minor issues which need to be addressed properly," said government negotiating team member Pradeep Gyawali.

"There are no major problems," said rebel negotiator Dev Gurung.

A new date for the signing would be set by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala after consulting with Maoist rebel leader Prachanda, the government negotiating team member said.

Prachanda was due to fly to New Delhi from Kathmandu on Friday to attend a media conference, the first outing on the world stage for the reclusive rebel leader. There was no immediate word on whether his trip would go ahead.

Analysts said the delay in signing the peace deal could only have been expected.

"Both the government and the Maoists had limited time to sign the deal so it is natural for the two sides to take time. Making decisions in a hurry would only leave room for regret in the future," said Krishna Khanal, political science professor at Tribhuvan University.

The deal, struck last week, will see the Maoist rebels take 73 seats in a new 330-seat parliament to be formed before the end of the month.

In return, the rebels have pledged to end their "people's war" that has claimed more than 12,500 lives, place their weapons and

soldiers under UN monitoring and join the political mainstream.

The Nepalese army will be confined to their barracks and will also lock up some of their weapons.

"Our whole party organisation will focus on the peaceful political process rather than war," rebel negotiator Dina Nath Sharma told AFP earlier this week.

Sharma said that the party would change its war-time organisational structure.

US sees reinvigorated al-Qaeda in South Asia

REUTERS, Washington

al-Qaeda is reinvigorating its operations from havens on the Afghan-Pakistani border and poses a growing challenge to US interests in both Iraq and Afghanistan, American intelligence officials said on Wednesday.

Five years after the September 11 attacks and the fall of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the network led by

Osama bin Laden has replaced leaders killed or captured by the United States and its allies with new seasoned militants.

"It has shown resilience," CIA Director Michael Hayden told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"The loss of a series of al-Qaeda leaders since 9/11 has been substantial. But it's also been mitigated by what is, frankly, a pretty deep bench of low-ranking personnel capable of

stepping up to assume leadership positions," Hayden said.

"These new leaders average over 40 years of age and two decades of involvement in global jihadism."

Hayden was testifying at a Senate hearing on Iraq and Afghanistan along with Army Lt Gen Michael Maples, director of the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence Agency.