

Tough talks ahead as US-India nuclear deal set to become law



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) and his wife Kaur (R) are greeted by Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso upon their arrival at Tokyo International Airport yesterday.

Manmohan in Tokyo to seek support

AFP, Tokyo

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday started a visit to Japan to seek support from the major civilian atomic power for the controversial US-India nuclear cooperation pact.

Singh, the first Indian premier here in five years, will have a red-carpet reception throughout his stay as Japan seeks warmer relations with a fellow Asian democracy to counter frequent tension with China.

The Indian premier said Japan and India "increasingly find that their long-term political, economic and strategic interests are converging."

"I look forward to using this visit to elevate India-Japan relations to a qualitatively new level," Singh, who arrived Wednesday evening at Tokyo's Haneda airport, said on leaving New Delhi.

During the four-day visit, the Indian prime minister will sign agreements to start negotiations on a free trade pact in January and to expand flights and trade, officials said.

But despite the good feelings, Japanese leaders appear divided

on one of Singh's signature foreign policy feats -- his deal with US President George W. Bush to bring India out of the nuclear wilderness.

Under the pact, the United States would export nuclear fuel and technology to India which would put its civilian-use reactors under outside scrutiny.

The deal needs to be approved by the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which controls the movement of nuclear material and was set up to exclude India after its first atomic test in 1974.

Japan is the only nation to have been attacked with nuclear bombs and also one of the biggest producers of atomic energy, a paradox that may let it hold the keys to India's entrance into the global civilian nuclear club.

A foreign ministry official said Japan would wait for Singh's explanations and to see the final shape of the US-India treaty.

"We should wait for these developments before Japan can define its own positions," he said on condition of anonymity.

The pact still faces widespread accusations in India that it is too intrusive.

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush on Monday will sign into law a landmark civilian nuclear agreement with India but experts say the two nations are bracing for tough negotiations on the nuts and bolts of the complex deal.

The accord finally sailed through the US Congress on Saturday, allowing the export of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in the more than 30 years since the Asian country first tested a nuclear device.

The White House announced Tuesday that Bush would sign the "Henry J. Hyde United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act of 2006" into law on December 18.

Even so, experts say, there are significant hurdles to be crossed.

"There are still many steps before it becomes something that is complete," Michael Levi, a science and technology expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, a respected US think tank, told AFP.

They include devising a bilateral agreement incorporating all technical details of the deal as well as nuclear safeguards for India that must be endorsed by the international community.

Popularly known as a "123 Agreement", the bilateral pact will be the sole binding document defining the terms of the anticipated nuclear commerce arising from the deal, which the US Chamber of Commerce says could open up a whopping 100 billion dollars in opportunities for American businesses.

The bilateral agreement will have to be approved again by the US Congress, to be controlled next year by Democrats known for their strong non-proliferation views.

"The completion of a 123 Agreement is really a codification of the major and difficult decisions we have already made," said Nicholas Burns, the top US negotiator of the nuclear deal.

"And, of course, there is a long process towards the finish line, but it is not going to be, in my judgment, as difficult as the last 18 months," he said of the pact, agreed by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh back in July 2005.

One key component of the deal

is nuclear safeguards, which India, a non-signatory of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), would be subject to under a separate agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the global nuclear watchdog.

The other is the guidelines governing civilian nuclear commerce to be drawn up with the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG).

The pace of the negotiations for the bilateral pact would depend on how far the Indians will go in accepting IAEA safeguards aimed at ensuring that New Delhi does not use any US nuclear materials or technology to expand its military nuclear arsenal. "I think the primary obstacles going forward are in crafting an appropriate safeguards agreement with the IAEA and an appropriate agreement at the NSG," Levi said.

"The main point of conflict is over how permanent the safeguards will be," he said.

India first agreed for the safeguards to be permanent but now is asking for an exception if bilateral nuclear cooperation is scrapped in the future, Levi said.

Washington stopped nuclear cooperation with India after it conducted its first nuclear test in 1974.

Under the US legislation passed last week, if India conducts another nuclear test, the US president "must terminate all export and reexport of US-origin nuclear materials, nuclear equipment, and sensitive nuclear technology to India."

Indian atomic scientists and military officials are wholly opposed to a moratorium on nuclear testing and likely will declare this provision a deal-breaker, said Stratfor, a leading US security consulting intelligence agency.

The other "big sticking point" for India, it said, was a US provision -- although non-binding -- on securing New Delhi's cooperation in containing Iran's sensitive nuclear program.

"Though the requirement has been watered down, the mere inclusion of an Iran clause will be cause for protest by India's vocal leftist parties," which provide needed support for India's ruling Congress-led coalition, Stratfor said.

Pakistan drops terrorism charges against Rauf

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani court dropped terrorism charges yesterday against a British man suspected of being a key figure in an alleged plot to blow up transatlantic airliners, his lawyer said.

Rashid Rauf, 25, was arrested in central Pakistan in early August. Pakistani officials said that his detention led to the uncovering of the conspiracy and that he was linked to Al-Qaeda.

His lawyer Hashmat Habib said a judge at an anti-terrorism court in Rawalpindi near Islamabad had agreed to his petition that two charges relating to terrorism were "not relevant and this court cannot try him".

Nepal leaders, Maoists start fresh talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoist leaders began fresh talks yesterday aimed at hammering out an interim constitution that could result in the suspension of the monarchy.

Officials said the two sides, who signed a landmark peace deal last month to end a decade of civil war, were still at odds over who should be the Himalayan nation's new head of state -- with the Maoists hoping to end the reign of embattled King Gyanendra.

"The leaders will try to sort out the differences on some crucial issues, including who to be the head of the state in the interim period," Ramesh Lekhak, a government negotiator and Minister for Labour, told AFP.

King Gyanendra was stripped of most of his powers in May, after massive protests forced him to end direct rule.

Technically, he is still the head of state -- albeit with no power over the army and no political role.

Some members of the multi-party interim government are arguing the job should be left empty until scheduled elections next year for a constitutional assembly that will decide once and for all whether the 238-year-old monarchy should stay or go.

But the fiercely-republican Maoists want to see Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala -- the respected octogenarian architect of the peace deal -- or left-wing parliament speaker Subash Nemwang named as interim head of state, a move that would complicate the king's chances of a comeback next year.

Either way, the king looks set to temporarily lose his job.

Maoist negotiating team leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara told AFP that a further sticking point was the

slow process of "arms management" -- implementing an agreement for the rebels to be confined to camps with their weapons and placed under United Nations supervision.

The UN has an initial batch of 35 monitors slated to arrive within the next few weeks, but is still some way off being able to monitor the tens of thousands of fighters the rebels claim they have.

The prime minister has warned the process, which will involve the rebels entering government and parliament, may not be able to move forward as long as rebels and their weapons roam free.

At least 12,500 people were killed during the rebel "people's war" that officially ended with the signing of a peace accord. The former insurgents, however, still control large tracts of the countryside.

Mizan new king of Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's unique revolving monarchy was passed on yesterday to the youthful sultan of oil-rich Terengganu state, a keen rider who has represented his country at international equestrian events.

Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin, at 44 Malaysia's second-youngest king ever, will serve a five-year term after he was sworn in at a solemn ceremony at the king's palace in the capital Kuala Lumpur.

Clad in royal yellow and sporting a sparkling ethnic Malay head-dress and a ceremonial knife, he was flanked by Malay state rulers as he read and signed an oath of office vowing to be loyal to Malaysia's laws and constitution.

The new monarch pledged to protect Islam, Malaysia's official religion, and to ensure "a fair and peaceful rule in the country."

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi then presented and read a letter declaring Mizan as king.

The sultan of northern Kedah state, Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah, was also sworn in as deputy king.

Mizan and his wife, Nur Zahirah,

33, arrived earlier Wednesday from Terengganu and headed for parliament for an official welcome from Abdullah.

They were given a 21-gun salute after Mizan accepted a guard of honour. Ministers and foreign dignitaries shook hands with Mizan and his queen, also dressed in yellow with a tiara placed on her headscarf.

Mizan will be formally installed as Yang di-Pertuan Agong (He Who is Made Lord, in Malay) in a grand ceremony next year at a date to be set.

Neighbouring Singapore sent its congratulations and expressed optimism bilateral ties will grow during the new king's reign.

"Under your majesty's guidance, I am confident that Malaysia will continue to make good progress in its development efforts," said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Malaysia has had a system of elective monarchy since independence in 1957, with the rulers of nine of the country's 13 states choosing a new king every five years.



PHOTO: AFP

The 13th king of Malaysia, Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin (R) walks with Queen Nur Zahirah (C), while escorted by Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (L), during the king's welcoming ceremony at Parliament in Kuala Lumpur, yesterday.

No trace of serial killer as death toll mounts



PHOTO: AFP

A woman looks at the website of News of the World in London, yesterday that offered a record £250,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of a serial murderer feared to have killed five prostitutes in a quiet English town.

AFP, Ipswich

Police grappled yesterday with the grisly task of identifying two new bodies found near a quiet English town gripped by fears of a prostitute serial killer, as the death toll rose to five.

Detectives stepped up the search for forensic evidence after the discovery Tuesday near Ipswich of two corpses believed to be those of missing prostitutes Paula Clennell, 24, and 29-year-old Annette Nicholls.

The finds bring to five the number of bodies found in less than two weeks near the eastern port town.

They have evoked thoughts of one of Britain's most notorious serial killers, east London's elusive Jack the Ripper, who murdered five prostitutes in 1888 and was linked to several other killings.

They have also revived more recent memories of Peter Sutcliffe, the "Yorkshire Ripper", who preyed on prostitutes and murdered 13 women and attacked seven others between 1975 and 1980.

All the corpses have been found in the countryside around Ipswich, some 80 miles northeast of London, prompting one of Britain's biggest ever murder inquiries.

"This is a most unprecedented inquiry. Nothing like this has ever happened," said Alastair McWhirter, chief constable, or head, of Suffolk Police.

"If you think back to the Yorkshire Ripper, the murders there took place over a long period of time ... We're responding to it effectively and as well as we possibly can."

The corpses of the first two murdered prostitutes, Gemma Adams, 25, and 19-year-old Tania Nicol, who both went missing from Ipswich's red light district, were found on December 2 and 9 respectively.

Police confirmed Tuesday that the strangled body of a third woman found in woods Sunday was 24-year-old Anneli Alderton.

Later that day, a member of the public found a fourth body and a police helicopter crew member called out to survey the scene spotted the fifth shortly afterwards.

The streets of Ipswich were virtually deserted overnight -- the 30 or so prostitutes who usually work the red light district seemed to heed police advice to stay indoors, while the streets were all but empty of revellers during the normally busy Christmas party season.

Pairs of police officers carried out patrols to reassure local people for the second night running, while motorists were being stopped and questioned.