

US aims for final Indian nuclear deal in 2007

Bush signs bill into law

REUTERS, Washington

Backed by American business, the United States aims to complete the remaining approvals for nuclear cooperation with India in roughly six months, but lingering questions could delay action, analysts said.

President George W Bush signed a law on Monday that represents a major step toward allowing India to buy US nuclear fuel and reactors for the first time in 30 years.

Beyond that, the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group must change its rules governing nuclear trade; the International Atomic Energy Agency and Delhi must agree on a "safeguards" inspections regime. The US Congress must also approve a second law -- on technical details of the deal -- before US nuclear transfers to India

can take place.

Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said the technical agreement, called a 123 agreement after a section of the US Atomic Energy Act, would be concluded "in the next few months" and "there aren't any major issues left to decide."

After that comes the IAEA plan for inspecting 14 of India's civilian nuclear plants and then the NSG rules change. Burns said: "I've talked to each one of those countries, and I'm confident that the Nuclear Suppliers Group will act."

NSG members Russia, Germany, Britain, France, and Japan and Australia have all announced support for nuclear cooperation with India, he said.

And after recent talks in Beijing, Burns concluded: "I do not believe the Chinese will block this."

He acknowledged that Ireland,

Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland have doubts but hoped they would eventually join a consensus favouring changing the NSG rules.

The NSG prohibits trade with states that are not members of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and do not allow safeguards on all nuclear facilities -- India, Israel, and Pakistan.

Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association said India and the IAEA are still debating inspections, and consideration by the NSG may not proceed easily either.

India may accept safeguards only if the United States and others guarantee a steady nuclear fuel supply. Yet safeguards are meant to be permanent and this is underscored in the US law Bush signed, he said.

Under the law, US nuclear exports would be ended if India

tested a nuclear weapon, as it did in 1998.

Kimball said countries sceptical about allowing a nuclear trade exception for India may suggest alternative proposals.

Meanwhile, American companies are preparing to take advantage of a vast new Indian nuclear market worth \$150 billion.

Seth Grae and Dennis Hays, top executives at Thorium Power Ltd., told Reuters they can't negotiate a final deal with India until the "123 agreement" is approved by Congress.

But they are in preliminary discussions on providing thorium technology for Indian fuel and reactor designs and could conclude a deal once Congress acts.

Thorium is a radioactive metal and the firm develops proliferation resistant nuclear fuel technologies.



PHOTO: AFP
US President George W Bush signs HR 5682, the United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act as Congressional and Cabinet members look on Monday in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC.

Sino-Indian expedition to find sources of two big rivers

AFP, New Delhi

A team of Indian and Chinese scientists will embark on a joint expedition in the Himalayas to find out the exact sources of two of Asia's biggest rivers, an official said yesterday.

The scientists will set off in April 2007 to the remote Mount Kailash peak in Tibet, where the Brahmaputra and Sutlej rivers are believed to originate.

"The experts will spend one month in Tibet to study the glaciers which feed the two rivers and trace their exact source," said HPS Ahluwalia, president of the Indian Mountaineering Federation (IMF).

The federation and the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Sciences will sign a memorandum of understanding on the agreement in New Delhi Thursday.

The geologists and mountaineers will also attempt to find out the impact of global warming on the

glaciers.

"An expedition like this has not been done for 100 years," Ahluwalia said. "The region is the biggest reservoir of fresh water on earth."

In October, the Indian media reported that China was planning to dam the Brahmaputra -- called Yarlung Zangbo in China -- to divert water to its Yellow River. Beijing denied the reports.

The 3,000 kilometre (1,800 mile) Brahmaputra is one of Asia's longest rivers that traverses first Tibet, then India and Bangladesh before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

The Sutlej -- about 1,450 kilometre-long -- originates in Tibet, and flows through India to Pakistan.

Mount Kailash, a remote peak in Tibet thought to be the source of the rivers, is considered sacred by millions of Hindus and Buddhists.



PHOTO: AFP
Schoolgirls run past an armed member of the executive forces loyal to the ruling Hamas movement as shooting takes place nearby in Gaza City yesterday. Five Palestinians were killed and seven teenagers were wounded in clashes between rival factions in a busy Gaza City street.

Israel to step up Golan settlement building

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Interior Minister Roni Bar-On said yesterday he intended to accelerate housing projects on settlements in the occupied Golan Heights, defying recent Syrian calls for peace talks.

"I made the decision after I toured the Golan Heights where I saw that the Syrians were accelerating the construction of houses in the town of Quneitra" on the border with the Jewish state, Bar-On told army radio.

"Instead of leaving this area in ruins as they had for decades, the Syrians want to populate the area which means this is more than a war front for them," he added.

A leader of the Golan local council, Sami Bar-Lev, said the construction of 400 additional homes is under way in Katzrin, the largest Jewish settlement where about 7,500 people live.

Israel captured the strategic Golan Heights plateau from Syria

in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and disputes over the return of the territory contributed to the collapse of peace talks in 2000.

On Monday, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert rejected renewing peace talks despite a call by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"We do not have the impression that there is currently a basis for opening negotiations with Syria," Olmert told a joint media conference after talks with visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

In an interview with the Italian daily La Repubblica last Friday, Assad called on Israeli and US leaders to negotiate with Damascus to revive peace talks which have been frozen for almost seven years.

"Many voices are being raised in Israel" for dialogue with Damascus, Assad said. "So I say to Olmert: let him try, and see if we are bluffing."

US military challenges Bush's troops plan

Gates warns against failure in Iraq

AFP, REUTERS, Washington

Top US military officials are questioning a White House plan to send between 15,000 and 30,000 more US troops to Iraq for up to eight months, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The paper, citing unnamed US officials familiar with the "intense" debate, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously disagree with the plan, in part because the force's mission has not been defined.

The Joint Chiefs believe the White House is pushing the plan for more troops partly because of limited alternatives, according to the Post.

Top Pentagon officials have told President George W. Bush that a short-term troop increase could give a boost to virtually all the armed factions in Iraq, without strengthening the position of the US military or

Iraq's security forces in the long term, the Post reported.

An unnamed senior Bush administration official told the newspaper that it is "too simplistic" to say the White House and the Pentagon are fighting over whether to send more troops, but did say the military has questioned the option.

US troop levels in Iraq have dipped to 129,000 over the past week but have generally hovered around 140,000.

Plummeting public support for the Iraq war at home has spurred the president to conduct a major strategy review, set to be announced in early January.

Meanwhile, Robert Gates, sworn in as US defence secretary on Monday, said he understood the desire to bring troops home but that failure in Iraq would be a "calamity" that haunts and threatens America for decades.

"All of us want to find a way to bring America's sons and daughters home again. But, as the president has made clear, we simply cannot afford to fail in the Middle East," Gates said at the Pentagon.

"Failure in Iraq at this juncture would be a calamity that would haunt our nation, impair our credibility and endanger Americans for decades to come," he said.

The 63-year-old former CIA director acknowledged during his Senate confirmation hearings in December that the United States was not winning in Iraq, but said it was not losing either.

Gates was officially sworn in at 7:03 am EST by White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten in the chief of staff's office. Later, he was ceremonially sworn in at the Pentagon by Vice President Dick Cheney, one of the Bush administration's strongest defenders of the Iraq war.

Blair has failed to influence US

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair's foreign policy has failed because of his inability to influence Washington and his successor must carve out a leading role for Britain within Europe instead, a report said yesterday.

The Chatham House think-tank said in a wide-ranging analysis of Blair's foreign policy that he was the first to recognize how the United States would react to the September 11 attacks, but made a huge mistake in backing its war on Iraq.

The influential London-based institute said the prime minister had erred in failing to coordinate a European response that might have tempered Washington's actions.

US, North Korea meet for direct nuke talks

AFP, Beijing

Two senior US delegations held direct talks yesterday with officials from North Korea as a diplomatic drive to persuade the Stalinist regime to give up its nuclear weapons entered a crucial phase.

Finance experts from the two nations met in Beijing to discuss a drawn-out dispute over US sanctions on the North that the cash-strapped nation has said must be resolved before it will consider surrendering its nuclear arms.

They met for three hours on the sidelines of six-nation talks aimed at convincing North Korea to disarm, which resumed only on Monday after a 13-month suspension caused by Pyongyang's objections to the sanctions.

The restart of the talks came after North Korea conducted its first-ever atomic test on October 9. Kim Jong-Il's regime celebrated the test as a major national achievement but the detonation triggered international condemnation.

As the financial teams huddled down in Beijing Tuesday, officials said the chief US and North Korean envoys to the six-nation forum met separately for their first formal face-to-face encounter since the talks restarted.

While no details were immediately available on what was discussed in both meetings, US envoy Christopher Hill said earlier Tuesday that the day's events would be vital in determining if Pyongyang may be prepared to disarm.

Foreign medics sentenced to death in Libya HIV case

REUTERS, Tripoli

A Libyan court sentenced five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor to death on Tuesday for deliberately infecting hundreds of children with the HIV virus that causes AIDS.

"Justice has been done. We are happy," said Subhy Abdullah, who daughter Mona, 7, died from AIDS contracted at the hospital in the town of Benghazi where the medics worked.

British police arrest 2nd man in prostitute case

REUTERS, London

Police arrested a second man yesterday on suspicion of murdering five prostitutes in one of Britain's most dramatic suspected serial killings.

"A second man has now been arrested by detectives ... on suspicion of the murder of all five women," Chief Superintendent Stewart Gull of Suffolk police told a news conference.

He said the man was 48 and was arrested at his home in Ipswich in eastern England at 05:00 GMT on Tuesday.

Fresh discord in Nepal as rebels call strike

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Students and labour groups backed by Nepal's Maoist rebels blocked traffic in the capital yesterday in a strike called to protest against the appointment of ambassadors by the interim government without consulting them.

The day-long strike, the first by the rebel groups since they began a peace process with the government in May, pointed to fresh strains in their uneasy relationship.

The rebels have called for transport, businesses, schools and factories to shut down in Kathmandu.

Early morning traffic in the hill-ringed city was disrupted by protesters, some of whom tied a rope across a road, burned tyres and set up other roadblocks to stop vehicles.

The Maoists and the government last month signed a landmark peace deal declaring an end to the decade-old anti-monarchy rebellion that has killed more than 13,000 people.



PHOTO: REUTERS
Joseph Barbera, one of the founders of the legendary animation studio Hanna-Barbera, poses with three of the characters 'Scooby-Doo (C) along with Tom and Jerry (R) that he and William Hanna created in this March 16, 2005 file photo. Barbera, half of the famed Hanna-Barbera team, died on Monday at age 95, the Warner Bros. film studio said in a statement.

Cartoon legend Barbera dies

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Legendary Hollywood animator Joseph Barbera, whose characters Fred and Wilma Flintstone and Scooby-Doo made generations of people laugh, died on Monday at age 95, the Warner Bros. film studio said in a statement.

Barbera founded Hanna-Barbera Studios with his partner William Hanna nearly 50 years ago, and it grew to become one of Hollywood's best known animation companies producing hundreds of cartoons and winning numerous awards.

He died at his home in the Los Angeles-area community of Studio City with his wife Sheila by his side, Warner Bros. said. No further details were disclosed.

"The characters he created with his late partner William Hanna are not only animated superstars, but also a very beloved part of American pop culture. While he will be missed by his family and friends, Joe will live on through his work," Warner Bros. Chairman Barry Meyer said in a statement.

By mid-afternoon on Monday, flowers were already being placed on Barbera's star on the famed Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Barbera and Hanna, who died in 2001 at age 90, met at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio in 1937 and first worked together on the cartoon, "Puss Gets the Boot," which led to the creation of famous cat and mouse friends, Tom and Jerry.