

Libya offers talks to US over chemical arms plant

CAIRO, Apr 12: In a surprising move, Libya offered Thursday to begin talks "without preconditions" over US suspicions it is building an underground chemical weapons plant, reports AP.

The United States has accused Libya of building a plant inside a mountain at Tarhunah, 60 kilometers (40 miles) southeast of the capital, Tripoli, to make nerve gas and other chemical weapons.

US Defence Secretary William Perry, on a visit to Egypt earlier this month, said Washington would not allow the plant to begin operation and suggested it was vulnerable to American military strikes.

Libya's foreign minister, Omar el-Muntasser, dismissed the allegations Thursday as another lie by US intelligence.

"What I want to make clear is that nothing of what Perry said exists except in the imagination of US intelligence," el-Muntasser said at a news conference. "No chemical weapons factory exists in

Libya, whether above ground or below ground."

But he said Libya was willing to discuss the allegations with Washington, insisting it has not quarrel with the United States.

"We are ready to conduct dialogue without preconditions with any country who will agree to talk to us," he said.

El-Muntasser was in Cairo for the signing of a treaty making Africa a nuclear-free zone.

Libya says tunnels in the mountains at Tarhunah are part of construction to bring water from desert aquifers in the south of Libya to Tripoli and Benghazi on the coast. The project eventually will supply the capital with 42,000 cubic metres (1.4 million cubic feet) of water a day, the official JANA news agency said.

The Tarhunah facility reportedly was designed to replace a plant at Rabta, 90 kilometers (55 miles) southwest of Tripoli. The Rabta plant was reopened last fall, five years after a suspicious fire that Libya blamed on US and Israeli agents.

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ROK ruling party loses parliamentary majority

SEOUL, Apr 12: President Kim Young-sam's governing party lost its parliamentary majority Friday, but the bigger loser was the key opposition party, which didn't win enough seats to open a corruption investigation against Kim, reports AP.

Electoral analysts agreed that recent North Korean military incursions into the neutral border zone helped the ruling party gain support among undecided voters worried about national security in Thursday's balloting, widely seen as a midterm referendum on Kim and his ruling party.

With vote-counting completed, Kim's New Korea Party won 139 seats in the 299 member unicameral National Assembly, 11 seats short of the one-seat majority of 150 it enjoyed going into the balloting.

But the margin of the setback was not as big as many observers had predicted, and the results were not expected to endanger political and economic reforms Kim has been

pushing.

"I regard the election results as reflecting the people's aspiration to pursue reforms amid stability and break the shells of old politics," Kim said at a meeting with aides.

"To pay back the people's unchanging support, I will exert all my efforts to beef up national security and strengthen the economy," he said.

Young new faces led the ruling party's strong showing in the populous Seoul metropolitan area by toppling many opposition heavyweights.

That gave the party encouragement, ruling party spokesman Kim Chul said.

The governing party campaigned with a direct call for opposition leader Kim Dae-jung to retire. South Korean

politics have been dominated for decades by Kim Dae-jung and other old politicians.

Kim Dae-jung's No 1 opposition party, the National Congress for New Politics, suffered most, winning only 79 seats, far short of the one-third of the assembly it had hoped to secure.

The lackluster performances dwindled hopes of Kim running for President in 1997 elections, which would mark his fourth try at the nation's highest office.

Kim Dae-jung also had promised to open a legislative investigation into a corruption involving the president if his party won one-third of the assembly seats.

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The Kim Young-sam regime had the benefit of maximum abuse of its money power and the North's armed incursions in the demilitarized zone. The main opposition party said in a statement. "But we humbly accept the results."

Nigerians banned from performing Hajj

DUBAI, Apr 11: Saudi Arabia has banned all Nigerians from entering the kingdom to perform the annual pilgrimage to the Islamic world's two holiest shrines, the Saudi Civil Aviation authority said today, reports Reuter.

Saudi Civil Aviation president Alia Khalaf has issued a circular to airlines flying into the Kingdom ordering them not to accept Nigerian passengers for health reasons.

"Based on reports declared by the Nigerian Ministry of Health it has been decided to prevent Nigerian pilgrims from entering the Kingdom and performing the Hajj this year," said a copy of the circular obtained by Reuter.

"Therefore it is required not to accept any Nigerian pilgrim from any destination or point in the World," it added.

Any airlines transporting Nigerian pilgrims to the Kingdom will be instructed to return them back on the same flight the circular warned.

Nigerian diplomats in the Saudi capital Riyadh were unavailable for comment on the ban.

Ota seeks meet with Clinton

US to give Japan back military base in Futenma

TOKYO, Apr 12: The United States has agreed in principle to give Japan back a key US military base in Futenma, Okinawa, over the next five years, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun said today, reports AFP.

The agreement was reached in the bilateral special committee aimed at cutting the size of US military bases in the southern island ahead of the arrival of US President Bill Clinton to Japan Tuesday, the newspaper said in a report from Washington.

Under the accord, some units at Futenma will be transferred to the Kadena Base, the largest in Okinawa, while others will be reassigned to another US base in Iwakuni, Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan, Nihon Keizai said, quoting several sources from Japan and the United States.

AP adds Gov. Masahide Ota, who is leading a push to evict tens of thousands of US troops from Okinawa, is reportedly seeking a summit of his own with President Clinton next week.

Clinton is to arrive in Japan next Tuesday for a three-day visit, and the recent uproar on Okinawa over the conduct of the US troops is expected to be a major topic on his agenda.

Kyodo News reported that Ota has officially requested a meeting with Clinton and has been invited to a banquet in Tokyo in Clinton's honour. Clinton is to have a summit with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto on Wednesday.

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