



South African President Nelson Mandela joins the hands of US Vice-President Al Gore (L) and South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki (R) at Tuinhuus in Cape Town on Wednesday. Gore is in the city to attend the fifth South African/United States Binational Commission (BNC) plenary meeting which takes place on February 18. The two vice-presidents will head their country's delegations at the BNC. — AFP photo

Objections to \$ 150m WB loan request dropped US eases sanctions against India

WASHINGTON, Feb 18: The US government, citing a more flexible Indian policy on nuclear nonproliferation, is dropping its objections to a \$ 150 million World Bank loan request by India for a power project, an administration official said Wednesday, reports AP.

The disclosure represents eased sanctions imposed by the United States against India after it conducted a series of nuclear tests last May. Similar sanctions were applied against Pakistan, which followed the Indian tests with tests of its own.

President Bill Clinton has been in contact recently with the two countries' prime ministers. Atal Bihari Vajpayee of India and Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, about the possibility of a presidential visit to the subcontinent this year, the official said. Clinton has sent them letters and has contacted them

by telephone.

The official, who asked not to be identified, told reporters Clinton must be assured that any such visit would not be dominated by the same nuclear problems that have been the subject of repeated discussions at lower levels.

Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott has met with top Indian and Pakistani officials eight times since May and expects another round of talks before midyear.

Clinton was to have visited the subcontinent last year to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Indian and Pakistani independence but scrapped the trip after the tests.

During a visit to India two weeks ago, Talbott found the Vajpayee's government more receptive than before on a range of nonproliferation questions that interest the United States.

India has said it will sign the

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by the September deadline set by the United Nations. But it is demanding US concessions, lest it be seen as bowing to American pressure.

According to the official, India has been more responsive on other nonproliferation subjects, such as a restraint on the export of sensitive technology and on the production of weapons-grade material. The administration also has been seeking progress, without much success, on a narrowing of Indo-Pakistani differences over Kashmir.

The administration is hopeful that its decision no longer to block the World Bank's loan for the project in India's Andhra Pradesh state could help build momentum toward further progress. The official said the United States does not plan to support the loan but will allow a vote on it.

New method likely to detect lung cancer at early stages

WASHINGTON, Feb 18: Doctors may be able to devise a test to detect lung cancer before it becomes incurable using a new approach that involves washing lung cells from a patient's sputum with a little salt water, researchers said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Writing in the journal of the National Cancer Institute, Dr Steven Ahrendt of the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and his colleagues said their test would need to be developed, but the theory behind it worked.

There is no effective test available to screen high-risk groups for lung cancer, despite (its) being the leading cause of cancer deaths among both men and women in the United States, they wrote.

Under current standard methods of diagnosis and treatment, less than 15 per cent of patients with lung cancer will survive their disease," Adi Guzzard and John Minna of the University of Texas southwestern medical centre in Dallas said in a commentary on the report.

There had been the idea to screen people using sputum tests and X-rays, Guzzard and Minna said. Several studies showed those tests helped detect cancer earlier, but patients treated at that earlier stage had no better survival rates than patients whose cancer was detected later, they said.

That was because tiny cancer cells, undetectable by X-rays or other conventional methods, would have already spread by the time of the screening, they said. Because of the early spreading, lung cancer is different from breast cancer, which is easily caught by screening.

But molecular methods, which would find the cancer before the tiny cells spread, might help get around the problem.

Ahrendt's team worked with patients who already had small-cell lung cancer diagnosed. While the patients were having tumours removed, the researchers rinsed their airways with salt water,

BRIEFLY

Plane missing in Malaysia: A single-engine Beechcraft Bonanza plane with a man and woman aboard has disappeared in Malaysian airspace, officials and news reports said yesterday, AP says from Kuala Lumpur.

Air traffic control at Subang airport, near Kuala Lumpur, lost contact Wednesday with the aircraft as it flew from Phuket, Thailand, to the small Seletar airfield in Singapore, according to reports from Civil Aviation authorities in Singapore and Malaysia.

Australian FM to visit E Timor: Foreign Minister Alexander Downer announced Thursday that he will be meeting the East Timorese resistance leader Xanana Gusmao in Jakarta next week, reports AP from Canberra.

Downer told Parliament he will discuss the future of the former Portuguese colony, which Indonesia invaded in 1975 and annexed the following year, with a wide range of Indonesian leaders. These would include President B J Habibie and armed forces commander Gen Wiranto and leading opposition figure Amien Rais.

15 jailed in Azerbaijan: Fifteen opposition activists were sentenced Wednesday for their role in an anti-government rally last November that turned bloody when a mob attacked the protesters, AP says from Baku.

Four of those sentenced Wednesday in a Baku district court were given prison terms ranging from two to three years. The heaviest sentence was handed down to Adalyat Mamedov, a representative of the opposition Popular Front who is a relative and bodyguard of Elchibey's. Eleven people were sentenced to forced labour or probation for two or three years.



US President Bill Clinton (L) and First Lady Hillary Clinton respond on Wednesday as US Senator Chuck Robb, D-VA, makes a joke about Mrs. Clinton's speculated run for the US Senate seat in New York, soon to be vacated by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. This took at a Social Security event in the East Room of the White House. — AFP photo

'Bin Laden's whereabouts a mystery'

WASHINGTON, Feb 18: A top official of Afghanistan's Taliban-led government said Wednesday that Osama bin Laden, the exiled Saudi who is wanted in the bombings of American embassies in east Africa, is no longer in Afghanistan, reports AP.

Abdul Hakim Mujahid, a Taliban diplomat assigned to the United Nations, said bin Laden decided to leave Afghanistan on his own in recent days.

"We do not know where he is," Mujahid said. "He is not in the area of control of the Taliban."

Mujahid spoke to reporters after meeting with Karl F. Inderfurth, who heads the State Department's South Asia bureau.

The United States maintains contact with the Taliban even though it does not recognize it as the official government of Afghanistan.

In the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan, the Taliban controls all but a small area in the northeast part of the country.

Bin Laden, who reportedly dropped out of sight on Friday, has been indicted in the United States in the August embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 274 people.

The United States, which accuses bin Laden of financing and training an international terrorist network, has been demanding the Taliban stand trial over bin Laden to stand trial.

The Taliban have steadfastly refused, calling bin Laden an honored guest and a friend who fought with them against invading Soviet soldiers in the 1980s.

The State Department had no immediate comment on Mujahid's comments.

He said Inderfurth had planned to reiterate the US message that bin Laden must be brought to justice for his crimes.

Brief chronology of main events in Indo-Pak relations

1965: India and Pakistan fight their second war over Kashmir. The Soviet Union intervenes to reach a ceasefire.

1971: The third war between the two arch-rivals breaks out over the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

1972: India and Pakistan sign the Simla Accord which commits them to solve disputes, especially those over Kashmir, without the help of a third party. Pakistan continually carries out an armed insurrection in Kashmir. New Delhi says Pakistan is giving active support to the rebellion. Pakistan denies the charges and says Kashmiris are engaged in a legitimate struggle for self-determination.

1983-4: Islamabad accuses India of helping insurgents in Pakistan's Sindh province.

1984: Foreign secretaries of the two countries meet in Islamabad but the talks produce no agreement.

1996: The first provincial elections in Kashmir since the start of the separatist insurrection. Pakistan condemns the polls as a "farce." The polls are good relations with the Soviet bloc.

1983-92: India accuses Islamabad of arming and training Sikh guerillas who are fighting for an independent Sikh state in Punjab in India. Pakistan refutes the claims.

1983: Muslim separatists carry out an armed insurrection in Kashmir. New Delhi says Pakistan is giving active support to the rebellion. Pakistan denies the charges and says Kashmiris are engaged in a legitimate struggle for self-determination.

1979-80: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. Pakistan helps Afghan opposition Mujahideen fighters with the support of the west. India, a close ally of Moscow, refuses to condemn the invasion and continue to enjoy

Fresh clashes claim 80 in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Feb 18: Renewed fighting in Sri Lanka's embattled northern and eastern regions killed at least 76 Tamil rebels, three government soldiers and one civilian in the past week, the defence ministry here said today, reports AP.

Thirteen of the guerillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed by the navy during a confrontation in the week to Thursday, ministry spokesman Sunil Tennakoon told reporters here.

He said three government troops were killed while another 11 were wounded during the clashes in the northern and eastern regions where the LTTE is fighting to establish an independent homeland.

He said the guerillas this morning mounted a fresh attack against a navy facility in the north of the country and damaged navy boats but the sailors were able to "successfully" repulse the attack.

There were no immediate details of casualties from that attack near Killini in the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

Lewinsky's story in print Mar 5

LONDON, Feb 18: Monica Lewinsky's book detailing her affair with US President Bill Clinton will be published on March 5, her publisher said Wednesday, reports AP.

"Monica's Story," the result of Lewinsky's collaboration with Princess Diana biographer Andrew Morton, will be released simultaneously in the United States and Britain, said Lorraine Tyler, spokeswoman for Michael O'Mara publishers.

Michael O'Mara, chairman of the publishing company, has said Lewinsky was drawn to his publishing house by Morton's involvement.

"She likes the idea of an author who is used to writing sympathetic books about women who have relationships with powerful men," O'Mara said. "It wasn't the money. She could have got much higher prices elsewhere."

Annan writes to Gaddafi over Lockerbie affair

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 18: The UN secretary-general sent a letter of final assurance to Libya. Now Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi must decide whether to hand over two suspects for trial in the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jetliner, reports AP.

Families of some of the 270 people killed in the crash are angry that Gaddafi is being offered to sweet a deal — and that the investigation will not go beyond the two Libyans.

While the letter has not been made public, US officials informed some family members that Gaddafi has been told there will be "no attempt to undermine the Libyan regime" as a result of information obtained from questioning the two suspects.

George Williams, president of Victims of Pan Am Flight 103 which crashed in 1988, said the families of about 160 of the 189 Americans who died in the crash over Lockerbie, Scotland, said he was "amazed" that the United States and Britain would make such a promise.

"The way I read this is there will be no attempt to find Gaddafi and his regime complicit in this bombing," he said Wednesday in an interview. "It is ridiculous to tell us that we can't find Gaddafi and the Libyan government complicit."

Western diplomats confirmed that the letter does include such an assurance, but said it didn't necessarily preclude finding Libya accountable for downing the plane.

The United States, Britain and the United Nations signed off on the final letter which Annan handed to Libya's UN Ambassador Abuzed Omar Dorda early Wednesday afternoon.

South African and Saudi Arabian officials, who were asked to mediate by Annan, have said a deal is imminent.

"I hope that the understandings contained in the letter will be sufficient for us to move forward," Annan said.

Chirac voices strong caution to Serbs, Kosovar Albanians

PARIS, Feb 18: In a strong warning to both Serbs and Kosovar Albanians, French President Jacques Chirac said Wednesday that whichever side fails to come to agreement will suffer "all the consequences" if a deal isn't reached by Saturday's deadline, reports AP.

As NATO finalises military planning for deploying some 28,000 troops to police an accord, Chirac said in an interview with The Associated Press and Associated Press Television that France is ready to contribute 4,000 to 5,000 soldiers to the force.

The Co-operation Contact Group, comprised of the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Italy and Russia, has given Serbs and ethnic Albanians until noon Saturday to reach an agreement to end their conflict that has left an estimated 2,000 people dead.

Chirac opened the talks Feb. 6 in the 14th-century chateau in Rambouillet outside Paris, warning both sides to make peace for the sake of Europe.

Since then, despite high-power diplomacy, the talks have dragged on, with international mediators putting most of the blame for the slow progress on the Serbian side.

"We hope that before Saturday at midday, the two parties — Serbs but also Kosovars — will have understood that they have to accept," said Chirac, speaking in English.

NATO has warned Yugoslavia that its country faces airstrikes if it fails to agree to a peace accord, while the Kosovar Albanians have been told they will lose Western support if they reject the pact.

Chirac indicated he thought an agreement was possible.

Trial adjourned due to Anwar's toothache

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 18: The corruption and sex trial of ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's trial was put off Thursday after he complained of an excruciating toothache, reports AP.

Anwar, 51, was ushered into the courtroom by police officers as usual for his trial on four counts of corruption, but did not make any remarks.

His attorney requested Judge Augustine Paul to adjourn the hearing until Friday because of complications following a minor tooth operation that Anwar underwent earlier this week.

"He is in a very great pain and needs to be attended to quickly," Raja Aziz Addruse told the court.

He did not give details of the dental problem.

Anwar testified in his defence and was cross-examined by prosecutors last week before the court adjourned for Chinese New Year celebrations. He was scheduled to answer questions asked by his own attorneys on Thursday.

Triumph for love!

LAHORE, Feb 18: A couple whose love landed them in jail and later in court were exonerated of adultery charge, given their passports and permission by a Lahore High Court Thursday to leave Pakistan, reports AP.

Humeira and Mahmood Butt were arrested in the southern port city of Karachi last month as they prepared to board a plane to the United States.

Humeira was charged with adultery by her parents who opposed her marriage.

Her parents, who wanted their daughter to marry a cousin, said she already was married to the cousin, but Humeira said the marriage claim was a sham.

On Thursday the Lahore High Court agreed with her and ordered the authorities to return the couple's passports, a court officials said. Neither the couple nor their lawyer was immediately available for comment.

Polish parliament votes to join NATO

WARSAW, Feb 18: Poland's parliament on Wednesday ratified the NATO treaty, one of the last formal steps for the former Warsaw Pact country to enter the Western military alliance, reports AP.

Both chambers easily passed the so-called accession documents, which will be signed next week by President Aleksander Kwasniewski and submitted to US officials at a joint ceremony with two other NATO newcomers — Czech Republic and Hungary — on March 12 in Independence, Missouri.

Kwasniewski watched the Sejm, the powerful lower chamber, vote 409-7 with four abstentions to ratify the North Atlantic Treaty, then stood and applauded with the legislators.

A few hours later, the Senate voted 92-2 with one abstention for ratification.

The president has called the decision by Poland and its two former East bloc allies to join NATO "one of the most important in the 20th century" because it signaled a new era of global relations by ending forever the post-world War II divisions contained in the Yalta agreement that split Europe.

Before the Sejm vote, Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek noted that NATO membership brought a rare unifying moment in Polish politics, which remain torn by divisions rooted in the communist past. Buzek's government is a coalition of parties linked to the Solidarity movement that toppled communist rule a decade ago, while Kwasniewski is a former communist.

"We are guaranteeing Poland a place in the world and in European politics, which it has sought in vain to secure for three centuries," Buzek said.

Other speaker noted Poland always felt a stronger cultural and ideological link to Western Europe instead of the communist Soviet bloc.

North Korea, US likely to reach agreement on inspections by March

SEOUL, Feb 18: North Korea and the United States are expected to reach an agreement by early next month on allowing inspection of Pyongyang's suspected underground nuclear site, a report here said today, says AFP.

"Negotiations concerning the Kumchangni underground facility are expected to be completed by early next month," a South Korean government official was quoted as saying by the independent Hankyoreh Daily.

"When the talks are concluded, (US special envoy) William Perry will unveil his report on the US policy toward North Korea at a luncheon in Washington around the end of March," the official said.

The new US policy on North Korea is likely to centre on a package aimed at resolving outstanding disputes, including the north's development and export of missiles and the improvement of US-North Korea ties, he said.

South Korean foreign ministry officials declined to comment on the report.

The United States and North Korea will open a fourth round of talks on February 27 in New York on allowing access to the underground facility at Kumchangni.

Some US officials suspect the underground tunnel, which was found near the Yongbyon site of North Korea's declared nuclear facilities, might be intended to circumvent a crucial 1994 US-North Korea deal.

Under the Geneva deal, North Korea froze its nuclear programme



Fireworks light the Hong Kong skyline as the Chinese lunar new year firework display gets underway on Wednesday. Hong Kong celebrated the Year of the Rabbit by lighting up Victoria Harbour with its largest ever firework display in spite of a biting economic recession. The 23-minute display used a record 31,388 shells. — AFP photo

Bus ride will improve ties, hope India, Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Feb 18: A simple bus ride has become a symbol of the potential for better relations between India and Pakistan, whose enmity has three times erupted into war and last summer prompted tit-for-tat nuclear tests, reports AP.

On Saturday, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee inaugurates the first passenger bus service between the uneasy neighbours hitching along for the last stretch to join his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif for peace talks at the border.

"When you journey by bus, you are attempting to relate to the common man and woman," said Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

Of course, security concerns will make Vajpayee's trip uncommon. Hours after the passengers begin a journey of some 400 kilometres (250 miles) and 10 hours from the Indian capital of New Delhi to the Pakistani border city of Lahore, Vajpayee flies to the Indian border city of Amritsar.

From there, he will join a convoy of buses for the 37-kilometre (23-mile) trip to the border for a welcome ceremony. The two men will talk Saturday and Sunday in Lahore before Vajpayee flies back to New Delhi.

It will be only the second time an Indian prime minister has gone to Pakistan specifically to talk peace. The last such visit was in 1989, when Rajiv Gandhi flew to the Pakistani capital to discuss disputes that have festered since the two countries were formed out of British India in 1947.

The last all-out Indo-Pakistan war was in 1971. A low-level war continues with almost daily skirmishes over Kashmir, the Himalayan border region split between them and claimed by both.

Last May, India set off underground nuclear tests, saying it needed a nuclear defence against Pakistan and China. Pakistan responded with its own tests and both nations declared themselves nuclear powers.

"Both countries are under international pressure to prove they are not a bunch of irresponsible people, especially after the nuclear tests," said Prafu Bidwai, a New Delhi-based anti-nuclear campaigner. "There's tremendous popular sentiment to de-escalate tensions and that is the most important motivation for the talks."

After lower-level officials worked out the bus service agreement as part of confidence-building measures, Sharif was the first to propose using it as a diplomatic tool. He invited Vajpayee to visit on the first bus, and Vajpayee embraced the idea.

Sharif has said he hopes to start solving the Kashmir dispute.

RR Subramaniam, a researcher at the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, an independent think tank in New Delhi, said Vajpayee and Sharif may work out cuts in conventional forces, or establish a communications hotline.

With little people-to-people contact, it has been easy for extremists in both nations to whip up hate campaigns. Muslim groups in Pakistan have threatened to wreck Vajpayee's trip, while Hindu groups in India have said he should be invading, not visiting.

The consequences of poor relations can be seen in the faces of the thousands of Indians like Hayat, who uses one name only, who line up every day at the Pakistani embassy in New Delhi. Many want visas so that they can visit family members from whom they were separated by partition; both countries are stingy about granting such permission.

"We're all brothers and sisters. How can we hate each other?" asked Hayat, an 80-year-old farmer from a village near New Delhi, whose relatives like in Kota Radhakishan village near Lahore.

Urvasi Butalia, a book publisher in New Delhi whose uncle stayed in the Pakistani city of Lahore at partition and converted to Islam, is pessimistic about the bus diplomacy.

"Whenever leaders of both countries have problems at home, they make positive noises about friendship," she said. "It's easier than hard-core nitty gritty questions. The real question lies beyond the bus."

Unfortunate baby!

WASHINGTON, Feb 18: A newborn baby is in serious condition in hospital after being found abandoned in a trashcan, a local television channel reported Wednesday, says AFP.

Neighbours in Dumfries, Virginia, heard the baby's cries coming from the can and kicked it over, thinking a possibly wounded animal was inside, news reports.

When they did, they found the baby girl.

The baby's mother, a 12-year-old girl, apparently gave birth to the child, then wrapped it in a plastic bag and threw it away, the news said.

The mother will most likely not be charged with the abandonment because of her age, the station said.