



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is followed by presidential guards during a ceremonial procession to mark the opening of parliament yesterday. The Indian government unveiled a reform-oriented policy blueprint that pledged a "bold departure from the past" to take the country into the 21st century. — AFP photo

Delhi pledges to keep armed forces 'fully equipped'

Indian govt unveils sweeping reform blueprint

NEW DELHI, Oct 25: The Indian government unveiled today a reform-oriented policy blueprint that pledged a "bold departure from the past" to take the country into the 21st century, reports AFP.

The five-year programme, outlined by President K R Narayanan in his speech to the opening of parliament, committed Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition to wide-ranging economic, social and political reforms.

While focusing on the domestic economy, Narayanan's address to the joint session of both Houses of parliament also stressed the government's desire to broaden relations with the United States and improve ties with neighbouring China.

Defining the government's guiding principle as one of "faster growth with employment," the president's speech included new policies for developing infrastructure — especially, roads, power and telecommunications.

Pledging to create 10 million new jobs every year, the address warned that the "scourges" of poverty and unemployment could only be eradicated by pursuing a "bold strategy" of reform that would raise annual economic growth to seven or eight per cent.

"This strategy demands a new pro-development mindset in every section of society, polity and administration, creating a strong national consensus for a

bold departure from the past," Vajpayee's multi-party coalition, which was returned to power with an increase in majority following September-October elections, has already warned of "tough" belt-tightening policies aimed at reducing India's ballooning fiscal deficit.

The government is currently embroiled in a row with striking truck drivers over a steep hike in diesel prices.

Highlighting India's woeful infrastructure as "the most obvious constraint" on rapid economic growth, Narayanan's speech said priority would be given to private-sector investment in power, transport, telecoms and information technology.

The Department of Telecommunications will be corporatised, and stronger power given to the autonomous national telecom regulator, so as to "increase investor confidence and create a level playing field between public and private operators."

Meanwhile, the newly created Minister of Information Technology will implement an action plan aimed at making India an "IT superpower" in the early part of the next century and achieving a target of 50 billion dollars in software exports by 2008.

The government also promised to increase foreign direct investment from a projected four billion dollars in 1999 to 10 billion dollars an-

nually, by increasing transparency and cutting delays in project implementation.

In order to reduce the fiscal deficit, public sector sell-offs will be accelerated, government downsized and tax regimes overhauled.

India concerned at Pak military takeover

A Reuters report adds: Indian President K R Narayanan said today the military takeover of neighbouring Pakistan was a matter of serious concern, and that only democracy could guarantee peace and understanding between countries.

The recent military takeover of Pakistan is a matter of grave concern. Democracy alone can guarantee peace, understanding and cooperation among countries and people," Narayanan said in his customary address to a joint session of parliament that lays out government policies.

Pakistani army chief General Pervez Musharraf ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup on October 12 and installed himself as the country's new ruler.

"We are watching the situation in Pakistan with careful attention," Narayanan said, adding that Islamabad must stop "cross-border terrorism" in India's Jammu and Kashmir state and elsewhere in the

country.

New Delhi will follow the "principle of zero-tolerance" in dealing with terrorism, Narayanan said.

Another AFP report adds: India's defence forces will be "fully equipped" to counter any threat to national security. President K R Narayanan told the opening of parliament today.

Outlining the new government's five-year policy, Narayanan said the recent conflict along the disputed Kashmir border with Pakistan had underlined the need to modernise India's armed forces.

"Government will ensure that our defence forces are fully equipped to meet any challenge to our national security," Narayanan said in his address to the first joint session of both houses of parliament.

"There is little room for complacency," Narayanan said, highlighting a "sudden spur in terrorism" in Indian Kashmir in the wake of the May-July conflict.

"Government is determined to thwart all disruptive activities and maintain a vigil on all fronts," he said. While stressing New Delhi's continued commitment to "global nuclear disarmament," the president said India would pursue a nuclear weapons policy that ensured the country's strategic autonomy.

Philippine govt, Muslim rebels start peace talks

SULTAN KUDARAT, Philippines, Oct 25: The Philippine government Monday opened a peace initiative to end the last remaining Muslim insurgency in the south, but demands by rebel leaders for independence pointed to tough discussions ahead, reports AFP.

Retired army general Orlando Soriano, Manila's chief negotiator, and Aleem Abdul Aziz Mimbantas of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) opened the peace bid in the southern town of Sultan Kudarat.

As Soriano and Mimbantas embraced, their respective negotiating teams clapped hands to the applause of a largely Muslim crowd of 5,000 people.

Policemen and armed MILF rebels mingled outside the building where the opening cer-

emonies were held. Soldiers were stationed a kilometre away.

Soriano, a battle-grizzled veteran who once commanded the army on the restive southern island of Mindanao, called for both sides to seek peace and reconciliation.

"Let us embrace peace. Let us now leave the past behind us and bury our memories of hate and violence," he said in a speech.

MILF deputy chief for political affairs Ghazali Jaafar, quoting Pope John Paul II, said "peace is an obligation, peace is a duty."

He added: "No doubt Pope John Paul II said it well, but let me add that we in the MILF consider peace as our mission. The ideology of the MILF is anchored on the foundation of peace."

Barak arrives in Turkey for landmark visit

IZMIT, Turkey, Oct 25: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak arrived here Monday for a landmark one-day visit, the first ever to Turkey by an Israeli head of government, reports AFP.

Barak was met at the airport by his Turkish counterpart Bulent Ecevit before the two men went to inaugurate an Israeli-built village erected as part of Israel's aid to Turkey following a devastating earthquake in August.

The Israeli prime minister, accompanied by a large delegation including top army officers and his security adviser Danny Yatom, was due to fly to Ankara

later for talks with Ecevit, President Suleyman Demirel and other Turkish officials.

Turkey's Anatolia news agency has reported that Barak will discuss a number of defence projects, including possible joint production of Popeye-2 air-to-ground missiles.

In 1996, the two nations signed a military cooperation agreement that has been widely criticised by Iran and Turkey's Arab neighbours.

Other issues reportedly on the agenda are ties between Turkey and the European Union, the Middle East peace process and bilateral economic relations.

Jiang rejects int'l pressure over human rights

PARIS, Oct 25: China's President Jiang Zemin on Monday strongly rejected mounting international pressure over human rights and insisted his country had earned recognition for its successes in the field, reports AFP.

Speaking at a press conference with France's President Jacques Chirac, Jiang singled out a recent European Union (EU) report on human rights in China which he described as "interference in the internal affairs" of China.

Chirac predicted China would be a "great power of the world of tomorrow," adding that "a great power will surely be democratic."

But the French leader admitted that differences remained on "human values" despite their long talks on rights, democracy, religious freedom and Tibet. Both leaders indicated that little progress had been made.

Jiang said China had "al-

ways attached a great importance to human rights" and had achieved "successes which had attracted the attention of the whole world."

But despite his criticism of the EU report, Jiang said "China is always ready to dialogue with the European Union" on these questions.

The Chinese president said democracy "is not an absolute concept" but was "relative to the particularities of each country."

The two leaders held more talks at the Elysee palace on Monday morning following several private meetings at the weekend when Jiang and his wife, Wang Yeping, stayed at Chirac's country chateau in southwest France.

The two leaders sought to emphasise their agreement in other areas, particularly over the need for what Chirac called "a multi-polar" world that would counter US domination of international affairs.

Jiang told the press confer-

ence that the creation of a new world order should be an international priority to maintain peace in the new millennium.

But rights dominated proceedings, amid the demonstrations that have marked Jiang's visit to Britain last week and France.

Police detained more than 100 people who tried to disrupt the military ceremony to mark the start of the state visit in Paris on Sunday. Leading politicians took part in a rally by rights and Tibetan activists.

Gendarmes in military fatigues patrolled Paris streets and underground stations in central Paris on Monday as security remained tight.

Commenting on criticism of his decision to welcome Jiang at his country home and the military ceremony on Sunday, the French president said: "When you have serious things to discuss you have to create the conditions for such a serious discussion."



French President Jacques Chirac (R) welcomes his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin at the Elysee Palace in Paris yesterday. — AFP photo

N Korea deploys four missile units: Report

SEOUL, Oct 25: North Korea recently enhanced its missile capabilities by deploying four long-range missile units, a newspaper reported Monday, says AP.

The Chosun Ilbo, South Korea's largest and most prestigious newspaper, said the deployment of four Taepodong-1 missile teams was anticipated by South Korean officials, who rely heavily on US intelligence.

Communist North Korea, which has based its missile programme on Soviet-developed Scud technology, already has in place missiles with a shorter range.

South Korea's defense ministry declined comment on the newspaper report. Citing an unidentified government official, Chosun Ilbo said North Korea deployed one Taepodong-1 battalion at

Shari-north of its capital Pyongyang, and three others at Tugol near the western border with South Korea.

Seoul, the South Korean capital, is 56 kilometres (35 miles) from the border.

The newspaper did not say when the missile units were deployed.

Each Taepodong-1 battalion has nine launchers, Chosun said. The number of missiles was not known.

Western officials say the missile has an estimated range of 1,000 kilometres (810 miles) and can hit anywhere in Japan. Experts, however, question the accuracy of the weapon.

North Korea is believed to have developed a more powerful missile, Taepodong-2, with a range of 4,000 kilometres (2,500 miles). That puts Alaska and Hawaii within reach.

North Korea rattled nerves last year by firing a Taepodong-1 missile over Japan.

It then appeared on the verge this summer of test-firing another missile, believed by Western experts to be a Taepodong-2. After negotiations with the United States, the North agreed to suspend the plan as long as dialogue with Washington continues.

S Arabia won't ask for Laden's extradition

DUBAI, Oct 25: Saudi Arabia has said it does not plan to ask for the extradition of bombing suspect Osama bin Laden if the Afghan Taliban decide to hand him over to the United States, reports Reuters.

Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef told reporters on Sunday night that Saudi-born bin Laden was not a Saudi citizen, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported.

The kingdom stripped bin Laden of his nationality over his alleged role in violent attacks on US targets.

Asked if Saudi Arabia would ask for bin Laden's extradition, Prince Nayef said: "I have said many times Osama bin Laden is not of much interest to us. Only Saudi nationals are of interest of us and bin Laden is not a Saudi national."

The United Nations Security Council last week voted to impose sanctions on the Taliban,

which controls most of Afghanistan including the territory where bin Laden is believed to be based, if it failed to hand him over for trial.

The Taliban offered on Saturday to hold talks with the United States over bin Laden, but Washington reacted by saying it wanted action not words over the Islamic guerrilla leader.

The United States accused bin Laden of plotting bombings of its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August last year that killed at least 226 people and injured more than 4,000.

The United States fired more than 70 cruise missiles at suspected bin Laden training bases in eastern Afghanistan in reprisal for the embassy bombings.

Bin Laden denies the charges and the Taliban have in the past rejected the US demand for his extradition.

'Safe passage' opens for Palestinians

EREZ CROSSING, Gaza Strip, Oct 25: The mayor of a small town in the Gaza Strip became the first Palestinian to use the "safe passage" linking the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which opened Monday after a delay of almost a month, reports AFP.

"I hope this will be a step to bring more peace between people," said Musa Abu Sahadi, mayor of the Palestinian Gaza town of Bani Suhayla, as he drove into the passage in his private car.

Palestinian civil affairs minister Jamil Tarifi and the director-general of Israel's public security ministry, Arieh Shifman, attended a formal opening ceremony at the Erez border crossing that separates Israel from the Gaza Strip.

"We hope it will be a passage for peace which will develop the Palestinian and Israeli economy," said Shifman.

Tarifi said: "We hope to continue in this positive spirit so we can implement the other outstanding issues under the interim agreement."

The passage was due to open on October 1 under the Sharm el-Sheikh peace accord signed last month, although Israel and the Palestinians first agreed on such a route under a May 1994 agreement on Palestinian autonomy.

Israel said on Sunday it had so far distributed to Palestinians some 1,500 of the magnetic cards needed to use the route.

Bush says China poses no threat to US

WASHINGTON, Oct 25: Former US President George Bush said yesterday that China poses no threat to the United States, reports Xinhua.

"It's a threat if we mishandle the relationship, but it's not a threat," Bush said on the Fox News Sunday programme which was broadcast throughout the nation.

During the interview, he replied with a firm "no" when asked if China was a threat.

"China is not seeking hegemony. I see no evidence, and I'd like one person who's critic of China on the Republican right or the Democratic left to tell me why they think they're seeking hegemony," he added.

Bush held in China as head of the US liaison office in Beijing in the 1970s. He was elected US president in 1988.

No plan to set up military courts: New Sindh governor

Army to help improve law and order

KARACHI, Oct 25: The new governor of southern Pakistan's Sindh province Monday said the army would help improve law and order in the troubled region but opposed the setting up of military courts to curb lawlessness and acts of terrorism, reports AFP.

"Indeed improvement in law and order situation will be my top priority. We want peace here," retired army marshal Mohammad Azim Daudpota said after taking oath as governor.

He said crime had declined in the provincial capital Karachi after the Nawaz Sharif government was ousted in the October 12 coup.

"Till now there is no terrorism or heinous crime and we want to maintain such peaceful atmosphere,"

Daudpota said the army, police and paramilitary troops would work together to eradicate terrorism in the province.

The new governor, named by army chief General Pervez Musharraf to run the administration, said he had no plans to set up military courts.

"I do not think so and nothing of that sort is in the offing," he told reporters.

Karachi, the commercial hub and Pakistan's only port city, has seen frequent outbreaks of political, ethnic and sectarian violence. Around 4,000 people have died over the past four years.

Sharif earlier this year established special anti-terrorist courts and more than 50 people were sentenced to death, mostly activists of the influential

Mohajir Qaumi Movement. The convicts are awaiting decisions on their appeals in superior courts.

Some 25,000 police and 8,500 paramilitary troops remained deployed here to control violence.

Police blame militants from political factions, sectarian groups and hundreds of independent criminal gangs for the unrest.

Daudpota also took oath under the Provisional Constitution Order (PCO) promulgated by Musharraf after he imposed a state of emergency and assumed power as chief executive.

Under PCO, Musharraf's action cannot be challenged in the courts.



Argentina's president-elect Fernando de la Rúa (L) and Vice President-elect Carlos Alvarez (R) salute supporters in Buenos Aires on Sunday. The opposition candidates De la Rúa and Alvarez won the country's general elections by a landslide. — AFP photo

Opposition leader wins presidential elections in Argentina

BUENOS AIRES, Oct 25: Opposition leader Fernando de la Rúa claimed a resounding victory in presidential elections Sunday, promising jobs and dignity to Argentines weary of recession and disenchantment with President Carlos Menem's flamboyant style, reports AFP.

"We have come to recover the dignity of the Argentine people," the social-democrat said in a victory speech before cheering fans at hotel in the city center.

De la Rúa, 62, capitalised on anti-Menem sentiment, contrasting his austere and dignified style with that of the president whose antics and penchant for fast cars and celebrities have amused, but at times also annoyed Argentines.

He has made it clear he will maintain free-market policies and fiscal austerity, and that he has no intention of changing the peso-dollar parity Menem introduced in 1991 to stabilise the economy.

But he promised to help those who were left by the way-side by the radical economic transformation of the country Menem launched 10 years ago. "We will grow in a climate of

equity, with equality for all," said De la Rúa, who ran for the opposition Alliance that bands together his social-democratic party and leftists of all hues.

He called on all Argentines to "work to create more dignified conditions for all our people, so there will be work, health care and education for all."

De la Rúa, who is currently mayor of Buenos Aires, also said his administration would "put an end to all forms of corruption."

Menem's administration has been credited with modernising Argentina and getting rid of hyperinflation. But its image has been tarnished by a slew of corruption scandals.

With about 77 per cent of the ballots counted, partial results gave 49 per cent to De la Rúa and 38 per cent to his closest rival, Eduardo Duhalde, 58, of the ruling Justicialista Party (PJ).

The election handed the PJ its worst defeat in the history of Peronism — a movement inspired by the populist policies of Juan Domingo Peron, who ruled with his celebrated wife Evita in the 1940s and 1950s.

BRIEFLY

Tunisian president reelected:

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was re-elected to a third five-year term with over 99 per cent of the vote in Sunday's election, according to first results from 10 of the country's 25 constituencies. AFP reports from Tunis.

Gunmen free 4 Japanese hostages:

Gunmen who kidnapped four Japanese hostages and their interpreter in southern Kyrgyzstan two months ago handed them over to Kyrgyz government negotiators. Japan's Kyodo news agency reported yesterday. Reuters reports from Tokyo.

11 killed as boat capsizes in China:

A fishing boat capsized in high winds off the coast of China's eastern province of Shandong, killing 11 women aboard, state media said Monday. AP reports from Shanghai.

Warsaw Pact founder dies:

Former Prime Minister Andras Hegedues, a founder of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact who later became a leading dissident in the final years of Communist rule, has died. Hungarian state radio announced Monday. He was 76. AP reports from Budapest.

Iran executes 3 Afghans:

Iran has hanged three Afghani men for drug trafficking, a newspaper reported yesterday. Reuters reports from Tehran.

The three were hanged last Wednesday after being convicted by a court of selling 500 grammes (1.1 pounds) of heroin and possessing larger quantities, the daily Hamshahri said. The paper did not say if the convicts were hanged in public.