

India,China open security dialogue

AFP, New Delhi

India and China Thursday began a new round of security talks with the objective of thrashing out differences over nuclear proliferation which has heightened tension between the two neighbours.

"It is a security dialogue which has begun today," a spokesman for India's foreign affairs ministry told AFP.

India's additional secretary T.C.A. Rangachari and Wang Yi, assistant minister at the Chinese foreign ministry, led the two delegations in the talks in New Delhi.

The talks are likely to focus on both global and regional security issues, the spokesman said.

India test fired its Agni-II missile last month during a visit by Li Peng, the second highest-ranking Chinese leader.

India said the timing of the tests was purely coincidental and had nothing to do with Li Peng's visit.

Tensions over nuclear weapons and proliferation between India and China flared in mid-1998 when India carried out a series of underground nuclear tests and cited the perceived threat from China as justification.

The two sides have traded a series of high-ranking bilateral visits since the tests and tensions have gradually eased.

Musharraf renews call for Indo-Pak talks

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf Wednesday reiterated a call for talks between Islamabad and New Delhi to find a peaceful settlement to their festering dispute over Kashmir.

"The thaw has taken place. The time to start talking has come," the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan quoted Musharraf as saying.

"I have nothing to offer afresh. The ball is in India's court. We have done everything possible," Musharraf told journalists in Rawalpindi.

Musharraf and Vajpayee had their first direct contacts on Friday in a telephone conversation about the earthquake disaster in the Indian state of Gujarat. They agreed to remain in touch.

Pakistan sent three planeloads of relief goods for the quake victims and Musharraf has offered further aid.

"My offer of talks is a sign of sincerity, not a sign of weakness. India has to respond," Musharraf said.

He urged New Delhi to allow a proposed visit here by a delegation from the All Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference (APHC), the main Kashmiri separatist alliance.

Laden number one threat to US security: CIA chief

AFP, Washington

Fugitive Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden is the biggest single threat to US security, which is also under siege from increasingly tech-savvy terrorists, CIA chief George Tenet said Wednesday.

In wide-ranging testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, Tenet ran through a long list of potential threats to the United States, and detailed political developments overseas likely to impact on its security.

And he accused China, Russia and North Korea of funneling high-grade military technology to US adversaries including Iran.

"The threat from terrorism is real, it is immediate and it is evolving," Tenet told senators in an open session, before the committee room was cleared for classified testimony.

"Osama bin Laden and his global network of lieutenants and associates remain the most immediate and serious threat," Tenet said.

The hearing was held as four men, believed to be members of bin Laden's Al-Qaeda group, were on trial in New York, accused of carrying out the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania which killed 224 people.

Tenet said that state-sponsored terrorism had declined over the last five years, but that it was being replaced by networks of harder-to-trace terrorist cells increasingly literate in modern technology.

"The same technologies that allow individual consumers in the United States to search out and buy books in Australia or India also enable terrorists

to raise money, spread their dogma, find recruits and plan operations," he said.

Tenet said the United States was vulnerable to growing arsenals of ballistic missiles around the world. Russia, China and North Korea were all guilty of proliferating missile technology, he said.

"I cannot underestimate the catalytic role that foreign assistance has played in advancing these missile and weapons of mass destruction programs, shortening their development times and aiding production," he said.

The growing prevalence of ballistic missiles around the world has been used by the United States as justification for a planned missile defence shield, which Russia and China vehemently oppose.

Looking to the Middle East, Tenet warned that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had stabilised his grip on power, through the use of brutal suppression and was ready to seek better ties with Arab states.

In the longer term, relations with China represented "one of the toughest challenges we face," he said. "They perceive the US as bent on keeping China from becoming a great power," he said, warning that in the run-up to next year's expected transition of power to a new generation of leaders, Sino-US ties could be tested.

"Chinese leaders will view every domestic and foreign policy decision they face through the prism of the succession contest."



PHOTO:AFP

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon (L) and Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, a member of Sharon's Likud party, visit the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, in the Old City of Jerusalem on Wednesday. It was Sharon's first public appearance the day after his landslide 25-point election win over incumbent prime minister Ehud Barak, who made the same visit the day after he defeated Benjamin Netanyahu just 21 months ago.

Gunman shot near White House

AFP, Washington

A man brandishing a handgun at the White House while President George W. Bush exercised inside was subdued with a shot to his right knee, officials said Wednesday, stressing that Bush was never in danger.

A uniformed agent of the US Secret Service charged with the president's safety ended a roughly 10-minute standoff outside the mansion's southern fence by felling a white, middle-aged man with one bullet to the knee.

The man, whom authorities said might have been suicidal, could face state or federal charges as early as Thursday.

The incident, which occurred at 11:36 am (2236 BST), came about 90 minutes after Bush held a public event on the South Lawn, but officials insisted the US leader and Vice President Dick Cheney, who also attended the event, were never in danger.

The suspect, identified in news reports as 47-year-old Robert Pickett of Evansville, Indiana, was taken to George Washington University Hospital where he was in stable condition and underwent surgery on the damaged right knee.

Quake jolts Japan

AP, Tokyo

A strong earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.9 jolted an island in southern Japan on Thursday afternoon, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

The quake was centered about 50 kilometers (31 miles) under the seabed near Miyakojima, and island 1,860 kilometres (1,153 miles), southwest of Tokyo, the Meteorological Agency said.

Local police said no damage or injuries were reported from the 2:41 pm (0541 GMT) tremor.

Supporters protest move to impeach Wahid

AP, Jakarta

Thousands of supporters of Indonesia's president ignored his calls for calm and marched through the streets of the ancient city of Yogyakarta on Thursday in protest against attempts to impeach him for alleged corruption.

There were no reports of violence. However, witnesses said many in the crowd were threatening to attack the local office of the rival Golkar Party, that used to support former dictator Suharto and is now backing moves against Wahid.

Police said hundreds of officers were guarding the building.

Thursday's demonstration in the central Javanese city, 400 kilometres east of Jakarta, follows days of escalating unrest triggered by a

standoff between President Abdurrahman Wahid and the parliament.

On Wednesday, police fired tear gas and warning shots against a massive pro-Wahid crowd that burned a Golkar office in the East Java capital, Surabaya.

Other Golkar offices have also been attacked in the region, which is Wahid's political heartland.

Wahid has called for calm, but has also described the attacks as "understandable" and a reflection of popular anger against the action of the legislature.

On Thursday Defense Minister Mohamad Mahfud called on Wahid to go to east Java and bring his supporters under control.

"I will suggest the president that he go to East Java immediately,"

Mahfud said before a Cabinet meeting.

The defense minister has previously warned that the military might intervene if civil unrest worsens.

The Cabinet meeting was convened at the state palace in Jakarta amid signs that Wahid's coalition government is feeling the strain of the ongoing political crisis.

On Wednesday Wahid dismissed justice Minister Yusri Mahendra for suggesting publicly that he quit.

Wahid has refused to step down despite mounting pressure after the parliament last week censured him over two corruption scandals and opened the door to his possible impeachment, which could take at least four months.

Lockerbie bomber on hunger strike

REUTERS, London

Convicted Lockerbie bomber Abdel Basset al-Megrahi has gone on hunger strike, a lawyer who has acted for the Libyan secret agent said on Wednesday.

"I have been told by the defence team that he has started a hunger strike," Stephen Mitchell told Reuters in London.

"But the defence team and the doctors are trying to dissuade him and tell him the right course is to pursue his appeal," said Mitchell, one of the lawyers who was originally part of the agent's defence team and first met Megrahi in Libya in 1991.

Charles, his son appear with Camilla for first time

AFP, London

Heir to the British throne Prince Charles on Wednesday appeared for the first time in public together with his son Prince William and his lover, Camilla Parker Bowles.

They put in the appearance at a star-studded party in London to mark the anniversary of a body which protects the royal family and others from intrusion by Britain's notoriously assertive press.

But it was carefully choreographed so that Parker Bowles arrived separately from the two princes and was not photographed together with them.

High profile graft charges against some Asian leaders

AP, Bangkok

For decades, Asia's ruling elites have plundered their countries for personal enrichment. Politicians and senior bureaucrats have skimmed budgets, accepted kick-backs and reveled in the ill-gotten gains.

Ex-Indonesian autocrat Suharto allegedly stashed away billions of dollars during his 32 years in power. Thailand's "buffet Cabinet" was notorious for helping itself to the state budget in the early 1990s. Former Philippine first lady Imelda Marcos became an icon of corrupt excess for her legendary shoe collection.

But recently the tables have been turned. Asian leaders from Japan to Indonesia are becoming targets of anti-corruption forces.

Not that Asia is going to clean up its act tomorrow. High-profile graft cases often stem not from the demands of good government crusaders, but from charges by political opponents of the accused.

Still, the days of unbridled corruption are unlikely to return.

Financial turmoil in the late 1990s, which ended who decades of prosperity, highlighted the corrosive effects of cronyism. This prompted democratic reforms that now make leaders increasingly vulnerable to charges of graft.

"The middle classes that have emerged (during the economic boom) have become less tolerant of corruption," said Stephen Young, an American analyst of Southeast Asia. "This has created a new political dynamic that leaves leaders far more exposed than ever before to charges of corruption."

In January, former movie star Joseph Estrada was ousted from the Philippine presidency amid huge street demonstrations after a drinking buddy said he provided Estrada with dlr\$ 8 million on payoffs from illegal gambling and dlr\$ 2.7 million from tobacco taxes.



PHOTO:AFP

Rade (R) and Lidija Milenkovic from Nis hold their four babies on Wednesday. The children, who were born on November 27, 2000 left Belgrade hospital two days ago. The government of Nis has agreed to provide the family, now living in a rented room, with a flat.

Space Shuttle Atlantis blasts off

AFP, Cape Canaveral, Florida

After a two-minute delay, the Space Shuttle Atlantis blasted off from Kennedy Space Centre here at 6:13 pm Wednesday (0513 BST), embarking on an 11-day mission to bring the much-awaited Destiny space lab to the International Space Station (ISS).

Atlantis's takeoff had been delayed due to minor technical difficulties, but the shuttle soldiered on, entering orbit eight and a half minutes later at an altitude of some 320 kilometres.

The US-built Destiny module -- which NASA officials have termed "the centrepiece" of the space station -- will serve as the ISS's command and control centre and will allow astronauts to conduct research in biology and physics, NASA said.

"The foundation has been laid,

the electrical lines and plumbing have been extended; we're ready to get the lab in place and go to work," said Michael Hawes, NASA's associate administrator for space development.

During the 11-day mission, Atlantis's five-member crew -- including Commander Ken Cockrell, Pilot Mark Polansky and Mission Specialists Tom Jones, Marsha Ivins and Bob Curbeam -- will use the shuttle's robotic arm to attach Destiny to the space station.

Jones and Curbeam will make three spacewalks to complete the new laboratory's installation, connecting power cables and other hardware, according to space officials.

Once the 9.2-meter-long (30.2-foot) module is attached to the ISS, the 112-tonne space station will be roughly the size of a three-bedroom house.