

Qian to meet Bush Mar 22

REUTERS, Killeen, Texas

President George W. Bush and Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen, their countries at odds over arms sales to Taiwan, will meet in Washington on March 22, the White House said on Friday.

Spokesman Ari Fleischer said Qian, China's top foreign policy official, would hold talks at the White House during a trip to New York and Washington from March 18 to 24.

Qian will be the first senior Chinese official to meet Bush, who is spending the weekend at his ranch near Crawford, Texas.

The statement gave no details of the agenda for the Bush-Qian talks, but one of the reasons Qian is travelling to the United States is to argue against fresh US arms sales to Taiwan.

Beijing is alarmed at signs the new Bush administration will sell Taipei billions of dollars worth of high-tech weaponry. Bush must make a decision in April on Taiwan's weapons shopping list.

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan issued a blunt warning on Tuesday of the "serious danger" of US arms sales to Taiwan.

Discovery docks with Int'l Space Station

AP, Cape Canaveral

Space shuttle, Discovery docked with the International Space Station early yesterday, bringing a new and enthusiastic three-person crew.

The 235-mile high linkup occurred an hour late because of a minor problem that cropped up at space station Alpha.

One of the station's two giant solar wings would not lock into place after being repositioned for the docking. Flight controllers drove the latches open and closed again; only then did both wings fasten securely.

Until the problem was fixed, Discovery remained at least 400 feet from Alpha as the two spacecraft zoomed around Earth. The concern, at least initially, was that the shuttle thrusters might damage the fragile wings if they were loose. The electricity-producing solar wings, installed by shuttle astronauts in December, stretch 240 feet from tip to tip.

As soon as he got the go-ahead to proceed, shuttle commander James Wetherbee slowly guided Discovery in.

China vows to get tough on corrupt judicial officials

AFP, Beijing

China's top judicial officials said Saturday the country's legal system was riven by corruption and inefficiency, and promised to root out troublemakers while pushing forward reforms.

Han Zhubin, head of the Supreme People's Procuratorate, said corruption, nepotism, abuse of power and inefficiency were major problems facing the procuratorial system.

In his annual report to the National People's Congress, China's parliament, he took responsibility for "inadequate supervision and guidance" and said problems would be tackled throughout the system.

Han said many prosecutors were rude and arrogant, and many needed to be kicked out of their jobs.

"Some use their power to violate the law for their own benefit, taking bribes, violating the law for the benefit of relatives and friends," Han told lawmakers.

He added: "The procuratorate will ... make a big effort to deal with the problem of violating law and discipline, and kick out all the black sheep."

Xiao Yang, president of the Supreme People's Court, meanwhile told parliament that protectionism by lower courts had led to a rise in violence against the police and a chronic lack of enforcement of verdicts.

He said major reforms were needed to the recruitment system which allowed unqualified people to become judges and prevented bad apples

being fired.

The reports said 1,292 judges were punished for breaking Communist Party or administrative rules during 2000, while 46 were prosecuted. A total of 494 rule-breaking prosecutors were punished, and 54 prosecuted.

However both Xiao and Han said major strides had been made in the fight against corruption and smuggling during 2000.

The procuratorate last year investigated 45,113 cases of corruption and malpractice, recovering losses of 4.7 billion yuan (566 million dollars). The courts sentenced 17,931 people for corruption last year, about 2,000 more than the previous year.

Han in particular pointed to the prosecution of 169 officials in the six-billion-dollar Xiamen smuggling case in Fujian province, as well as the prosecution and execution of parliament deputy chairman Cheng Kejie for taking bribes.

Cheng was the most senior Party official to be executed for graft and Han said his death gave "an effective and terrifying deterrent effect".

Xiao said the Chinese courts heard 5.3 million cases nationwide, and convicted 640,000 criminals -- a rise of 6.21 percent. Xiao said 6,617 people were found not guilty.

In 1999, Chinese courts heard a total of 5.7 million cases, up 12.3 percent from the previous year, with some 600,000 criminals convicted, an increase of 14 percent from 1998.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L) consults with Prime Minister Zhu Rongji during a session of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. China's top judicial officials said the country's legal system was riven by corruption and inefficiency, and promised to root out troublemakers while pushing forward reforms.

Italian doctor plans to start cloning babies

AFP, London

An Italian doctor who helped the world's oldest mother fall pregnant told the BBC on Friday he wants to start cloning babies for infertile couples.

Professor Severino Antinori said in an interview on BBC radio that a cloned baby could be created within two years using techniques already practised on animals.

The procedure would involve taking cells from an infertile father and injecting them into an egg, which would then be placed in the mother's uterus.

The resulting child would have the same physical characteristics as the father and infertile parents would not have to rely on sperm donors.

Antinori said he has 600 patients who want the fertility treatment, most of them in the United States, and he claims to have the support of an unidentified Mediterranean country for his research programme, which is likely to start in October.



PHOTO: AFP

Italian Professor Severino Antinori (L), Professor of Reproductive Physiology at the Rome's University and Panayotis Zavos, Director, Andrology Institute of America gave a conference on Human and Therapeutic cloning, at the Rome's Humberto 1er Polyclinic on Friday.

Antinori also thanked the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair for legalising the cloning of human embryos for research purposes.

The anti-abortion charity group Life condemned the doctor's plans but said it was "inevitable" someone would try to clone babies.

National chairman Professor Jack Scarsbrick said: "Science must be subject to ethical controls and moral controls. Cloning involves creating an entirely new kind of human being -- a human being generated asexually."

"This is a momentous step to take and society should be careful before doing something so radical."

Scarsbrick added: "It is very interesting that Professor Antinori has thanked Tony Blair for making this possible."

"The government's promises that cloning would be for research only and there would be no birth cloning are hollow."

The Italian professor first attracted controversy when he helped a 62-year-old woman have a baby eight years ago by implanting an egg in her womb.

He also helped a 59-year-old unmarried British woman to have twins two years later.

Mori likely to step down in April

AFP, Tokyo

Beleaguered Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, bowing to mounting pressure, is likely to announce he will step down next month, press reports said Saturday.

Mori was expected to submit to calls by his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) peers at a meeting scheduled for yesterday to bring forward to April elections for a new party president, Jiji Press and newspaper reports said.

Mori, one of Japan's most unpopular leaders in modern times, is widely expected not to seek re-election.

The replacement of Mori as the party head will thus effectively end his premiership too, as the new leader of the largest single party in parliament, the LDP, automatically becomes Japan's prime minister.

Yet in a typically opaque Japanese political trade-off, the embattled leader will stop short of announcing his clear-cut resignation plans for now, the reports said.

How he will convey his intention "will be an expression, which can be understood within the LDP, but not to people outside," the Asahi

Shimbu quoted a senior party member as saying. "That's the only way to do it."

Mori and the LDP's old guards were trying to save face using murky tactics, it said.

Their vagueness was due largely to a scheduled summit with US President George W. Bush on March 19, announced Friday, followed by a long-awaited meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 25.

"Ahead of these diplomatic schedules, it was judged unfavourable that his government is looked upon as 'a dead body,' inches away from stepping down," the influential daily explained.

Further adding to the government's dilemma is the threat by opposition parties to boycott budget deliberations in parliament if Mori voices his clear intention to leave office. The opposition argue a lame-duck government should not be in a position to push the budget through parliament.

Despite cosmetic efforts to make it look as though Mori's position is secure, a barrage of news reports have paved the way for his resignation.



PHOTO: AFP

US KFOR soldiers prepare to patrol the village of Debalde near the Kosovo-Macedonia border on Friday, as ethnic Albanian guerrillas continue to pursue attacks on Macedonia from Kosovo and southern Serbia. Macedonia closed its borders with Kosovo on Friday for the second time in less than a week to prevent incursions by ethnic Albanian rebels, an interior ministry official said.

UN urges Taliban to halt cultural vandalism

AP, United Nations

Calling the Taliban's planned destruction of Buddhist statues "an irreplaceable loss for humanity," the UN General Assembly urged the religious militia Friday to honour its previous commitments to protect Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

A resolution sponsored by more than 100 countries and approved by consensus urged the Taliban to take immediate action to prevent further destruction of the irreplaceable relics, monuments and artifacts.

It called on all UN members "to help, through appropriate technical measures, to safeguard the sculptures, including, if necessary, their temporary relocation or removal from public view."

The non-binding resolution was approved as opposition forces in Afghanistan reported that powerful

explosives had shattered large parts of two towering stone statues of Buddha, hewn from the cliff side in central Bamiyan province. The report could not be independently confirmed.

The Taliban, who rule about 95 per cent of the country, were not immediately available for comment and have refused to allow anyone to go to Bamiyan to verify conflicting claims about the extent of the damage to the third and fifth century carvings.

The General Assembly resolution, introduced by Germany, said "the destruction of the statues in Afghanistan, in particular the unique Buddhist sculptures in Bamiyan, would be an irreparable loss for humanity as a whole."

It "strongly calls upon the Taliban to abide by their previous commitment to protect Afghanistan's cultural heritage from all acts of

vandalism, damage and theft."

Germany's deputy UN Ambassador Hanns Heinrich Schumacher said the Taliban has made these commitments to Secretary-General Kofi Annan's personal envoy to Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell, to UN organisations including UNESCO, which is in charge of protecting cultural treasures, and to envoys of several governments.

The controversy began Feb. 26 when the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar ordered all statues in Afghanistan demolished, saying they were idolatrous and against Islam.

Germany's UN Ambassador Dieter Kastrup told the General Assembly that the Feb 26 edict was an unacceptable act of religious intolerance and appealed to the Taliban not to ignore international demands to stop the destruction.

CIA releases declassified Cold War analyses of the Soviet Union

AFP, Washington

The US Central Intelligence Agency forecast in 1987 that the Soviet Union would be unable to keep pace with the US "Star Wars" missile defence initiative and would seek US concessions in the form of arms control, according to a report released Friday.

The report, which contains echoes of the current debate over national missile defence, assessed the Soviet response to then president Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative, the space-based missile defence programme popularly known as "Star Wars."

A total of 19,000 pages of CIA research were declassified this week at a two-day conference at Princeton University examining how well US intelligence anticipated events in the Soviet Union.

Former Central Intelligence Agency boss Robert Gates said though the agency was not always correct in its analysis "the agency, over the decades, made a huge contribution in helping US policymakers understand America's major adversary."

CIA historian Gerald Haines and spokesman Robert Leggett note the agency "tried not only to discern Moscow's intentions but also to gauge the state of the Soviet economy, the USSR's technological base, the readiness and plans of Soviet military forces and the internal workings of the Kremlin."

With more than 850 documents released to represent a cross-section of CIA analyses about the length of the Cold War, which ran from 1947 to 1991, the agency includes an analysis of the likely impact to the Soviets of the Vatican's choice of Pope John Paul II in 1978.

"The elevation of the archbishop of Krakow ... to the papacy will

undoubtedly prove extremely worrisome to Moscow," the agency wrote, in a document dated October 19, 1978.

"Because of the impact of John Paul II, particularly his impact on Polish nationalism, the Soviets will now find it even more difficult to check and to counter Poland's instinctive, cultural and political gravitation to the West."

The CIA also called it an "irreversible setback" for Moscow's attempts since the end of World War II to "weaken connections" between the eastern Catholic churches and Rome.

"Over the long run, the election of a Polish pope will contribute to an increase in nationalism in east Europe," the CIA said.

Another document written during the 1948-49 Berlin crisis concluded the Soviets were unlikely to attack Western Europe to reports on the Soviet Union's military capabilities, its economy and its new technologies.

Assessing the Soviet reaction to "Star Wars," meanwhile, the CIA forecast that a limited response using a gradual increase in intercontinental ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and bombers, anti-satellite weapons and space mines would have only a modest impact on Soviet defence spending and the economy.

The agency said, however, that a "more robust, comprehensive response" focusing on extensive countermeasures, "would lead to unprecedented expenditures and greatly increased military demand for a variety of scarce resources."

The CIA report predicted the Soviet Union underestimated its ability to respond to the US initiative, and would use arms control measures to gain US concessions on missile defence.

The United States ultimately scaled "Star Wars" back in favour of dramatic strategic arms reduction agreements with the Soviet Union.