

Khatami visits Russia to boost military ties

AP, Moscow

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami on Monday launched talks in Moscow with Russian leaders hoping to resume arms sales to Iran, amid strong US opposition to growing ties between the two nations.

Khatami's four-day visit is expected to produce the first broad cooperation agreement between Moscow and Tehran since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution.

The talks were expected to focus on military cooperation, the oil and gas riches of the Caspian Sea which both countries border and Russia's help in building a nuclear power plant in Iran.

Khatami arrived in Moscow on Monday morning and was to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov. He was greeted at the airport by Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, who oversees Russia's military industrial sector, and the leader of Russia's 20 million Muslims.

Iran's ambassador to Moscow said recently that Tehran could buy up to \$7 billion worth of Russian weapons in coming years, making it a leading customer for Russia's ailing defense industry.

The Russian government has not divulged details of possible arms deals. However, officials speaking on condition of anonymity indicated that Iran had expressed interest in buying S-300 air defense missiles, fighter jets, helicopters, patrol boats and other weapons.

For years, Moscow's military cooperation with Tehran have caused concern in Washington, which believes Iran sponsors terrorists.

Police storm detention centre in Brazil to quell uprising

AP, Sao Paulo

Police stormed a juvenile detention centre and fired rubber bullets to quell an uprising during which inmates took about 40 hostages. One person was killed and 20 others injured in the violence.

Armed with knives, sticks and at least three guns, some 350 inmates of the Franco da Rocha Detention Centre went on a destructive rampage on Sunday, setting mattresses ablaze and taking workers hostage.

Trouble started after two armed men who were apparently there to supply the inmates with guns and help some of them escape bypassed security at the visitor's check point and walked into the centre, Sao Paulo police said.

Television pictures from a helicopter showed inmates beating many of the hostages. Five hostages were thrown from the rooftop but were able to walk away to safety, Globonews reported.

The inmates were protesting alleged abuses at the centre. Globonews said they also demanded the removal of the centre's director.

The man who died was one of the hostages. Police said he was hit by an inmate's bullet. Four of those injured were said to be in serious condition.

The violence ended after riot police jumped onto the roof from helicopters. About 30 inmates escaped in the melee.

Mori stands firm as opposition to press for immediate resignation

Earlier announcement 'not a resignation offer'

REUTERS, AP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, pressed by the opposition to tell the public his true plans, denied today that he had expressed his intention to resign in a meeting with ruling party elders at the weekend.

In a move to limit his lame-duck status, Mori on Saturday told five top powerbrokers from his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) that he would bring forward from September an election for the party presidency.

"Neither I nor the five LDP executives understood this as a statement of my intention to resign," Mori told a budget panel in parliament's Upper House, adding that his first priority was to enact the budget for the fiscal year beginning April 1.

Saturday's deal was widely viewed as a face-saving compromise to let the hugely unpopular prime minister stay in office a few more weeks while paving the way

for him to resign next month.

Ruling coalition leaders have defended the decision which left unclear when and how Mori would be replaced as vital to avoid a political vacuum at a time of pressing policy matters.

But the opposition party officials said Monday they would press for the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, saying his reported agreement in a closed-door meeting with leaders of his ruling party to step down soon has created a political vacuum.

Opposition party lawmakers angrily grilled Mori in Parliament, saying the decision to resign should have been made before the public, not in a secretive meeting of party powerbrokers.

"The nation simply can't understand why this is happening behind closed doors," said Yasuko Takemura, of the Democratic Party, the largest opposition group. "Are you concerned about the people at

all?"

No official announcement was made after the meeting late Saturday, and no news conference has been held. But a member of Mori's ruling coalition confirmed afterward that Mori had indicated he will step down after this year's budget is passed. That is expected later this month.

Mori reportedly indicated his willingness to resign by agreeing to hold early elections for the post of Liberal Democratic Party president, which he holds concurrently with that of prime minister.

Because of the Liberal Democrats' dominant position in Parliament, they have the power to name the prime minister, who is usually also LDP president. The party is to hold its annual convention Tuesday, but has not yet set a date for elections for party president.

Mori indicated in Parliament that he was open to the idea of early party elections, but said that was not

a resignation offer. His term as party president expires in September.

"I did not tell the party leaders I would resign," he said.

"I don't feel I should talk about such future matters," Mori added, refusing to say whether he would run for reelection as party head. "I want to listen carefully to the voices within the party and outside of it, and make my decision."

Mori has been coy about publicly confirming his plans because of concerns that as a lame duck he might not be able to properly carry out his duties before actually stepping down.

Ruling party lawmakers are keen to ditch Mori, his popularity in tatters after a string of gaffes and scandals before an Upper House election in July. The prime minister had been under intense pressure to make clear his plans to step down ahead of an LDP convention on Tuesday.

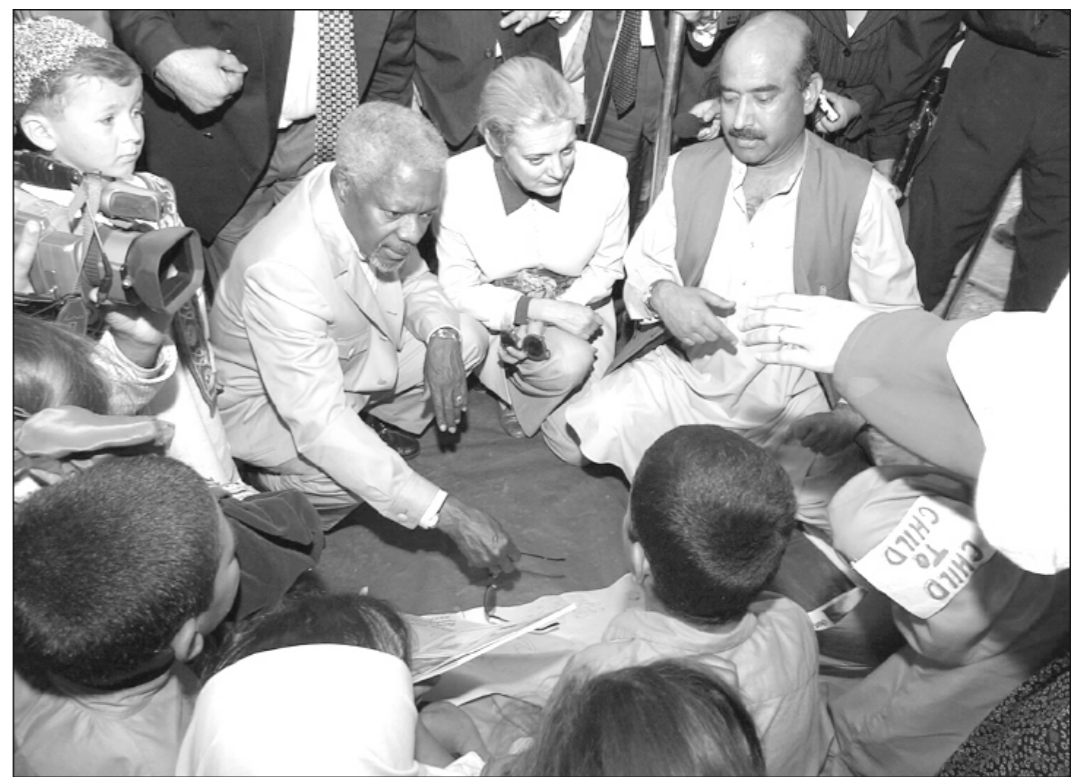


PHOTO: AFP
UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (L) along with his wife listens to lesson from schoolchildren of Afghan refugee camp in Shamshatoo refugee camp near Pakistani northwestern city of Peshawar yesterday. Kofi said that the world had not forgotten the 170,000 new Afghan refugees in Pakistan or the millions of their countrymen scattered throughout the world during the past two decades of war. Annan visited an Afghan refugee camp during his three-day stay in Pakistan.

India announces plans for talks on Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced plans Monday for an early resumption of talks on Kashmir, as New Delhi urged Pakistan to create an atmosphere conducive for a dialogue.

"Very soon we will start talks with everybody, and all parties to find a solution to the situation in Kashmir," Vajpayee told parliament, without specifying who would be involved.

Addressing parliament's lower house, Vajpayee said Pakistan must "change its activities... and its mindset" in order to create the right atmosphere for a dialogue.

The prime minister also welcomed a statement by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Islamabad on Sunday that the Kashmir issue should be resolved through bilateral means, rather

than the imposition of UN resolutions.

Annan's comments were "a signal of the changes in Kashmir," Vajpayee said.

India is opposed to any UN role in Kashmir, arguing that the dispute is a purely bilateral one between the two South Asian rivals.

The Indian foreign ministry stressed that bilateral talks on Kashmir, the subject of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan, can begin only if Islamabad suspends its support for "cross-border terrorism" in the region.

"Kofi Annan's reported comments are clear and self-explanatory," foreign ministry spokesman R.S. Jassal said.

"India too has been consistently calling on Pakistan to reaffirm its

commitment to the Shimla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration to create an atmosphere conducive for the resumption of a composite dialogue between the two countries," Jassal said.

"Pakistan has consistently been urged to abandon the path of hostility and to cease aiding and abetting cross-border terrorism."

India and Pakistan inked the Shimla accord a year after their third war in 1971, and the Lahore peace agreement was a product of prime minister Vajpayee's historic bus trip to the Pakistani city in February 1999.

Bilateral dialogue has been frozen since a bloody border conflict broke out in the Kargil area of Kashmir months after the Lahore visit.

Yugoslav war crimes suspect surrenders

AP, Belgrade

Blagoje Simic, a senior Bosnian Serb civilian administrator, boarded a plane yesterday for the Netherlands to surrender to the war crimes tribunal in the Hague where he faces charges of atrocities against Croats and Muslims during the Bosnian war.

Simic, the first Yugoslav citizen to turn himself into the UN court, said he was confident he will prove his innocence of war crimes.

His surrender comes as the United States has been stepping up pressure on Yugoslavia to cooperate with the tribunal or face a cutoff of aid.

Simic, a trained physician, was the municipal leader of the town of Bosanski Samac that was overrun by Serb forces in April 1992. Of the 17,000 Croats and Muslims, or about half the town's population, fewer than 300 were left at the end of the war in 1995.

Control of the town was crucial for the Serb effort to build a corridor between Serbia and the Serbs in the Krajina district of Croatia and western Bosnia.

Non-Serbs, especially professionals and civic leaders, were rounded up and herded into camps run by Serb police. Many were killed, tortured or sexually assaulted. The rest of the non-Serb population fled or was transferred to other villages, where they were forced into slave labour.

Simic, who was vice president of the town assembly, declared himself head of the "Serb Municipality Bosanski Samac" a month before the Serbian army seized the town. He remained the civilian head of the local government throughout the campaign of atrocities, and led the "Serb Crisis Staff" that directed the "ethnic cleansing" of the town, the tribunal said.

Socialists ahead in Paris vote

AFP, Paris

French Socialists looked in a strong position to take control of the city of Paris for the first time in more than a century Monday, after their candidate Bertrand Delanoë won a clear lead in the first round of municipal elections.

However the right, which has controlled Paris since 1977, promised a fight back in the week leading to next Sunday's second round, and in local elections across the country reports of a "pink wave" sweeping out right-wing mayors proved unfounded.

Delanoë, a 50 year-old senator who is also one of France's few openly gay politicians, won 31.31 per cent of the vote in Paris, and did well in the large residential arrondissements (districts) which must swing left if he is to win.

The main right-wing contender Philippe Seguin - representing the RPR of President Jacques Chirac - won only 25.74 per cent across the city, and suffered a big personal defeat with only 19 per cent of the vote in the 18th arrondissement where he was standing.

The poll appeared to confirm

predictions that Delanoë would be elected mayor after next Sunday, with voters expressing their exasperation at the charges of institutionalised corruption that have proliferated after 24 years of RPR rule.

A Socialist win would also be a powerful symbolic blow to Chirac, who was the capital's mayor for 18 years and used it to build his political career, a year ahead of national parliamentary and presidential elections.

Across the country, where 40 million voters were choosing mayors in 36,500 cities, towns and villages, polls showed that the mainstream right more than held its own against the parties of the Socialist-led coalition, with 47.8 per cent of the vote to 43.1.

Several ministers in Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's government also failed in their attempts to win right-wing towns: Transport Minister Jean-Claude Gayssot at Beziers, for instance, and Environment Minister Dominique Voynet at Dole. Employment Minister Elisabeth Guigou scored badly in the southern town of Avignon.

Blair leads in opinion poll

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, widely expected to call a general election for May 3, is way out in front as the voters' choice to lead Britain, an opinion poll showed today.

The ICM poll for the BBC's online news service put Blair on 47 per cent and opposition Conservative leader William Hague on 14 per cent just one point ahead of Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy.

Blair is believed to be planning a May 3 election to capitalise on opinion polls showing his Labour Party up to 20 points ahead of the Conservatives. He is seeking a second term.

Britain's three-week-old foot-and-mouth outbreak has prompted speculation in some farming and political circles that Blair might be forced to delay his election plans for fear of spreading the highly contagious livestock disease.

The ICM poll showed that 63 per cent of voters believed the general election should go ahead despite the foot-and-mouth crisis. Only 28 per cent disagreed.

Ministers were saying privately that they saw no reason why an election could not be held unless the outbreak got much worse, newspapers reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian student-protesters try to break through razor-wire surrounding the presidential palace in Jakarta yesterday. Some 8,000 people rallied to demand that President Abdurrahman Wahid step down.

Masked Zapatista rebels march into heart of Mexico City

AP, Mexico City

Masked Zapatista rebels urged passage of an Indian rights bill after riding triumphantly into the heart of Mexico's capital, welcomed by the president and 75,000 cheering supporters.

Fulfilling a vow in their declaration of war seven years ago, the rebels entered Mexico City's Zocalo plaza on Sunday. They assured they had no intention of seizing power.

"Mexico, we do not come to tell you what to do. We do not come to guide you in any direction. We only come to ask respectfully that you help us, that you do not allow that there be another dawn for this (Mexican) flag without us," said rebel leader Subcomandante Marcos.

The entrance capped a two-week tour of southern Mexico part of a campaign for a sweeping series of constitutional amendments that would guarantee greater political autonomy for Indians and expanded rights for their cultures.

On Monday evening, the 24 Zapatista leaders were to meet with a congressional commission to press for an Indian rights bill. They say they will stay in the city until the measure is passed.

Sunday's event marked the first time a rebel group had openly paraded into the city since revolutionary leaders Pancho Villa and

Emiliano Zapata the rebels' namesake did it in 1914.

The 23 rebel commanders and their military leader, Subcomandante Marcos, rode a flatbed truck into the city's main plaza, to chants of "You are not alone" from a massive crowd.

"Once again, the federal government and Congress have a chance to choose between peace with dignity and justice, or war against the indigenous peoples," said rebel leader Comandante David.

Marcos made a poetic appeal for a multiethnic Mexico and criticized President Vicente Fox, who has gone further than any of his predecessors to meet the Zapatistas' demands.

Marcos said the Zapatistas were a different brand of rebels; like the original army of peasants led by Zapata, "we do not aspire to hold power," Marcos said.

The Zapatistas have roots in Indian peasant organisations, church activists and a Leninist guerrilla group from northern Mexico.

Their only significant military success was the seizure of Chiapas towns. Fighting with the government lasted only 12 days before a cease-fire took hold.