



Mori leaves for US for talks with Bush

AFP, Tokyo

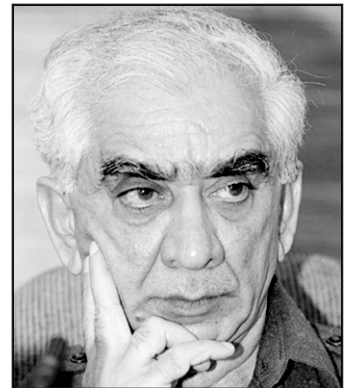
Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori left Sunday for Washington to hold summit talks with President George W. Bush, a foreign ministry official said.

His four-day visit will be the highest-level contact between the allies since a US Navy nuclear-powered submarine rammed and sank the Ehime Maru fisheries training vessel and killed nine Japanese on February 9.

Following his arrival in Washington Sunday afternoon, Mori is scheduled the next morning to hold a one-hour meeting with Bush, which will be followed by a "working lunch."

Mori will leave Washington later Monday for Honolulu.

On early Tuesday, he will visit the seas off Hawaii where the USS Greeneville submarine performed an emergency surfacing drill for the benefit of 16 civilian guests.



Indian FM given additional defence portfolio

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh has been given the additional charge of the defence ministry, after the resignation of George Fernandes following an arms bribery scandal, an official announcement said Sunday.

"The President of India, as advised by the Prime minister, has directed that Mr. Jaswant Singh, Minister of External Affairs, may hold the charge of Minister of Defence in addition to his current charge," the official statement said.

Defence minister George Fernandes had resigned Thursday in the wake of an arms bribery scandal which has rocked the coalition government of Prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Sonia asks supporters to be ready for elections

AFP, Bangalore

Sonia Gandhi, head of India's main opposition Congress party, Sunday asked her supporters to be ready for general elections as she stepped up attacks on the ruling coalition still reeling from an arms bribery scandal.

"For a fistful of riches, the men and women who rule in name of high principles have sold the honour of the seats they occupy," Sonia told thousands of cheering party workers on the concluding day of a national Congress enclave in Bangalore (southern India).

"Elections are the lifeline of democracy and it is therefore natural that we gear ourselves for elections whether they be panchayat (village level) or for the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament)."

The Italian-born Sonia is the widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi who was assassinated in 1991.

India's arms scandal erupted last Tuesday with the release of a video expose by a website, www.tehelka.com, showing senior politicians, bureaucrats and army officials apparently taking bribes from journalists posing as arms dealers.

This has "torn the mask of self-righteousness from the ugly face of corruption and venality. What has long been whispered in the corridors of power has now been being telecast to the world," Sonia said.

Upebeat Congress supporters, sensing the party's first real opportunity to seize the initiative from the government since it came to power 17 months

ago, cheered and applauded their leader.

The Congress which has often been criticised for not entering into alliances passed a key resolution signalling its willingness to seek a power-sharing arrangement with other parties.

The Tehelka expose led to the resignations of Defence Minister, George Fernandes, and of Bangaru Laxman, president of the BJP, the ruling hindu nationalist party which dominates the coalition government in India.

A key regional ally withdrew its support to the ruling coalition led by Prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"There can be no forgiveness. There can be no mercy. The BJP-led coalition government has lost the moral right to govern," Sonia said.

"Let the message go forth from Bangalore that we will fight every battle, wage every war, make every sacrifice to ensure that the country is liberated from the shackles of this corrupt, shameful and communal government," she said.

In an attempt to defuse the political crisis, Vajpayee, 76, on Friday ordered an enquiry into the arms bribery scandal, but it was rejected by the opposition. Keeping an eye on provincial elections next month in five Indian states, Sonia said the country needed a "renaissance of the Congress ... a revitalised Congress."

"The Congress mirrors India in all diversity. Only the Congress can ensure a strong centre, strong states. It is only the Congress whose core is secular," she said.



PHOTO: AFP
Congress(I) Party President Sonia Gandhi (C) leads a ceremonial procession of senior party leaders on the concluding day of the 81st Plenary session of the party in Bangalore yesterday. Sonia, head of the Indian opposition in parliament, called on her supporters to be ready for general elections, while continuing a scathing attack on the crisis hit Bhartiya Janata Party(BJP)-led government in the wake of a damaging bribery scandal.

Palestinians, Israel move to resume security cooperation

Sharon heads for Washington

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli and Palestinian officials took steps Saturday to resume security cooperation, following threats by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to reimpose a total blockade on the Palestinians ahead of his visit to Washington.

Palestinian sources said Israeli and Palestinian officials met Saturday evening at the Erez border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip to discuss the security situation in the Palestinian territories.

The meeting would be the first since the hardline Sharon took office

earlier this month.

An Israeli government source told AFP only that serious contacts had been made toward relaunching security cooperation.

Israeli radio also reported Saturday that a security meeting would be held in the coming days between Avi Dikhter, head of Israel's internal security service Shin Beth, and the Palestinian heads of preventative security in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, Mohammed Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub respectively.

Sharon had earlier sent a letter to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat "warning him that the easing of the

blockade decided this week would be cancelled if the Palestinians did not put an end to violence and resume security cooperation," an official from Sharon's office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"The Palestinian Authority may want to take advantage of the upcoming Arab summit to be held in Amman on March 27 and of the prime minister's visit to the US to spark off another burst of violence and show it has the power to destabilise the region," the official added.

Sharon is set to leave Sunday night for the United States on his first

foreign trip as prime minister. He is expected to push for a hardliner line against Syria and Lebanon, along with Arafat, when he meets Tuesday with US President George W. Bush.

Both the United States and the European Union have criticised Israel for its crippling blockade on the Palestinian territories, fearing it will lead the Palestinian Authority to disintegrate.

Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer announced Friday that some of the blockade measures would be relaxed, although the Palestinians call the steps superficial.

US census finds more illegal immigrants than expected

AFP, Washington

Undocumented immigrants probably make up a far greater percentage of the US population than originally believed, according to a report in Sunday's Washington Post.

The US government had estimated that illegal residents comprised roughly six million people, but recent census results are prompting them to revise that figure upward to as many as 11 million.

"Immigration -- unmeasured immigration -- is the thing we are looking at," John Long, chief of the US Census Bureau's population division, told the daily.

"The biggest candidate is . . . undocumented" immigrants," he said.

The census found that the overall US population is 281.4 million residents.

The headcount, conducted every 10 years, also

determined that there are some 35.3 million Hispanics living in the United States -- many more than the 32.5 million the government had estimated.

The discrepancy between the anticipated and real population figures could affect a myriad of federal programmes, from border enforcement programmes to visa regulations, officials said.

It could also explain why unemployment rates and wage trends have seemed out of step with the tight labour market of recent years.

Traditionally, undocumented immigrants have been concentrated in low-skill jobs, such as landscaping and office cleaning.

Although most such immigrants are Latino, officials said the census discrepancies had also led them speculate that undocumented workers were coming from a different mix of countries than previously thought.

Macedonian parliament calls for peace as battle rages

AFP, Skopje

The Macedonian parliament early Sunday called for measures to preserve peace, as Macedonian forces stepped up their battle against Albanian rebels amid growing fears of a new Balkans war.

The parliament, meeting behind closed doors since Friday, adopted a statement calling for "adequate measures to preserve peace and stability." It was backed by all the Albanian members, the ruling group and the opposition.

The statement, a copy of which reached AFP, said that "urgent and

effective measures will be taken to prevent any worsening of the situation."

The parliament met to examine the situation in the northeastern town of Tetovo where heavy fighting has been raging since Wednesday between the Macedonian forces and Albanian extremists.

The flare-up in violence across the region came as the UN's Balkans rights envoy, Jiri Dienstbier, warned that "Greater Albania" nationalism threatened to start a new Balkans war.

On the outskirts of Tetovo, special police armed with mortars

started Saturday to push back an estimated 200 gunmen after four days of heavy fighting that has left one civilian dead and at least 25 people injured.

Interior ministry spokesman Stevo Pendarovski said paramilitary police had driven off a "large number" of militants occupying a strategic hilltop overlooking Tetovo and captured other fighters.

They also destroyed a rebel weapons dump, he said.

At least 2,000 people have fled Tetovo's fighting, many seeking shelter abroad, officials said.

The parliament said that "secu-

ry in the country has gone downhill due to the activities of extremists who place in question the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Macedonia."

The statement went on: "The parliament will immediately intensify a broad political dialogue through the state institutions to enable a solution to be found to all the open questions in the country."

The parliament also called on international organisations to continue to "offer unconditional support to Macedonia's integrity and sovereignty along with necessary aid."

Norway peace envoy set for talks with Prabhakaran

AFP, Colombo

Norway's peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, is set for a crucial meeting with the island's Tamil rebel supremo to clear the way for possible talks to end ethnic bloodshed, a state-run paper said Sunday.

Solheim was expected in Sri Lanka "in the next few days" to hold talks with the elusive leader of the Tamil Tigers, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the Sunday Observer said.

Norway's attempts to broker peace in Sri Lanka received a boost on November 1 when Solheim had a rare meeting with Prabhakaran in a

rebel-held area of the island's north.

Since then, Solheim has stepped up his regular shuttle to Colombo for talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga and other political leaders to clear the way for a face-to-face meeting of the antagonists.

The state-run Observer said the government was keen that Prabhakaran participates in at least one round of talks when negotiations progress to an advanced stage.

"This particular round of talks could be held in the precincts of the Madhu church (in north-western Sri Lanka) Solheim has been told," the

Observer said.

Last Thursday, Solheim was in New Delhi briefing India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh on Oslo's peace bid in Sri Lanka, Asian diplomats here said.

India, which once armed and trained Sri Lanka's Tamil separatists, has raised fears that Norway's peace bid in the island could lead to foreign intervention in its backyard.

Oslo was invited by Kumaratunga to help bring the separatist Tamil Tigers to the negotiating table, but India was unhappy over a "mediator role" for an outside power, reports here had said.

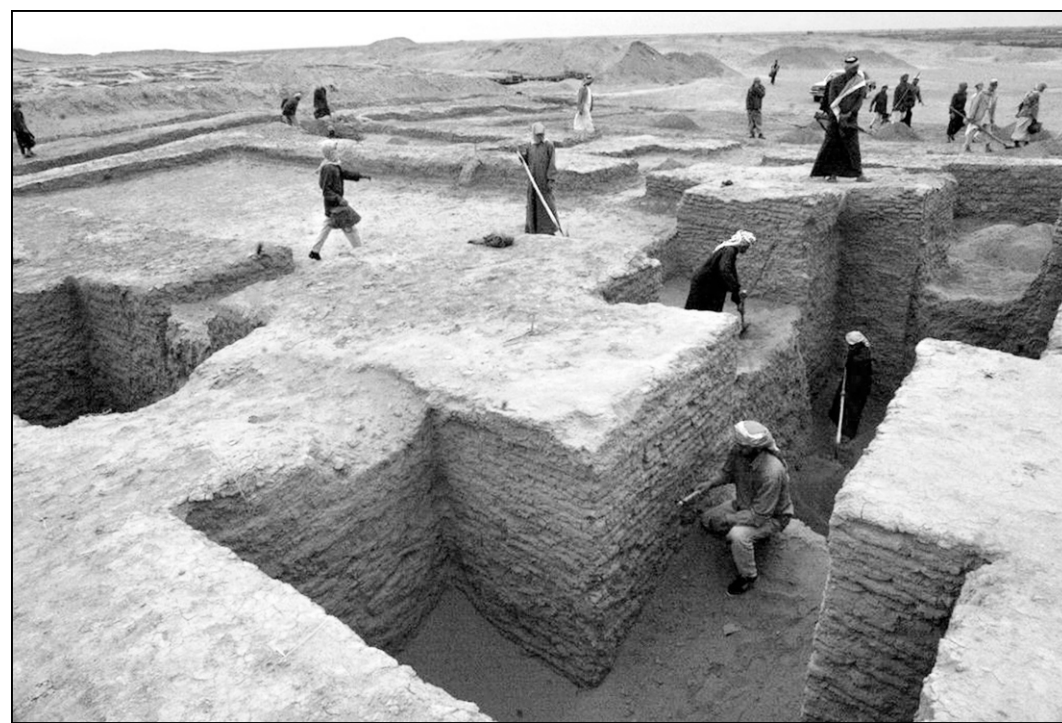


PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi workers excavate a newly-discovered ancient Sumerian town on March 13 in Umm al-Aqareb, 300 km south of Baghdad. A team of Iraqi archaeologists recently discovered the town, dating back to 2,700 BC and possibly one of the world's oldest archaeological finds. The vestiges of the town include a cemetery, houses and a palace.

Lanka wants to rebuild Bamiyan Buddha statues from rubble

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is seeking to buy the rubble and any remains of the Bamiyan Buddha statues destroyed by Afghanistan's Taliban rulers in a bid to rebuild them, an official here said Sunday.

Sri Lanka, the seat of Theravada Buddhism, had earlier offered to finance an international operation to save the two statues which date back more than 1,500 years.

Presidential aide, Lakshman Jayakody, said that he believed Sri Lanka had the expertise to reconstruct the statues.

"We have the expertise and experience in erecting such statues," Jayakody said.

"We want to make a formal request to get what is remaining of the Bamiyan Buddha statues."

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremarajaya and Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar made separate visits to Pakistan in a bid to pressure the Taliban to spare the priceless statues.

On Friday, the Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah

Mohammad Omar ordered 100 cows to be sacrificed to atone for delays in the destruction of the ancient statues in the central Bamiyan province.

Kabul's official media, however, did not make it clear if Omar meant the delay since Islam came to Afghanistan around 14 centuries ago or since the Taliban took Kabul in 1996.

"These cows are to be slaughtered by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) for the further glory of God, the Almighty's name and as an offering for the error and the delay in the destruction of the statues," Radio Shariat reported in Kabul.

Under Omar's "special instruction," 100 cows will be slaughtered on Monday and the meat distributed to the poor.

Omar, a war veteran and recluse, two weeks ago ordered all statues in Afghanistan to be destroyed to stop idolatry, regardless of their historical importance.

The dynamiting late last week of the two colossal statues provoked widespread international condemnation and strong criticism from Muslim leaders.