

Bush supports Annan for second term as UN chief

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush said Friday the United States supported UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for a second term in office.

"My administration thinks he is doing an excellent job as secretary general of the United Nations, and therefore, we heartily endorse his second term as the secretary general," Bush said upon receiving Annan in the White House.

Bush said that the United States looks forward to working "not only to make sure that you serve a second term but, once that's done, work closely with you to keep the peace and make the world more prosperous."

Annan, 63, said Thursday he would seek a second five-year term as secretary general. His current mandate expires December 31.

The United States is the second permanent member of the UN Security Council after France to endorse Annan for a second term in office.

Under the UN Charter, the secretary general is appointed by the General Assembly of 189 member states on the recommendation of the Security Council.

Russia may build Mir-2

AFP, Moscow

Russia is "already thinking" about building a new space station to be known as Mir-2, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov said Friday, hours after the first Mir had crashed safely to Earth.

The minister told ORT television that while Moscow was clearly committed to the International Space Station (ISS) project, "we are already thinking about a Mir-2 project."

Earlier Friday, Yury Koptev, head of the Russian Space Agency, did not dismiss the possibility of building a successor orbiter, but said it would only happen when Russia could afford it in addition to its dues for the ISS.

Once a proud symbol of Soviet success in space, Russia's 15-year-old Mir space station crashed safely Friday in a fiery death plunge into the Pacific.

Special benefit for immigrants in US

AP, Miami

Some immigrants who qualify for permanent residency in the United States but cannot adjust their status here because they entered the country illegally are eligible for a special benefit, immigration officials say.

Immigrants who qualify may apply for permanent residency in the United States if they file their petition by April 30 and agree to pay a \$1,000 penalty said the Florida office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The fine may be paid after the April deadline.

The benefit was made available on a temporary as a result of the Legal Immigration Family Equity Act enacted on December 21, 2000.

Without the provision, many people who entered the country illegally or violated their status are not allowed to file for adjustment in the United States. They must obtain their visas abroad.

Approximately 1,300 Florida residents have applied for permanent residence since the law became effective, said immigration agency spokeswoman Maria Elena Garcia.

Mr Bean saves the day in aircraft drama

DPA, London

"Mr Bean" star Rowan Atkinson saved his family by wrestling with the controls of a plane after the pilot fainted.

Atkinson, 46, took command of the Cessna light aircraft when the pilot suddenly keeled over as they flew at 16,000 feet above a game park in Kenya, according to a report in Saturday's editions of The Sun.

Rowan and his wife Sunetra, 39, desperately tried to revive the flier while their children Ben, 8, and Lily, 6, watched in terror.

The actor who has never flown a plane before took charge from the co-pilot's seat as the Cessna lurched from side to side and started to nosedive.

An excruciatingly long five minutes later the pilot came round, almost as quickly as he had passed out. Incredibly, he had no idea he had fainted, apparently through dehydration. He took over the controls and went on to land safely.

Qian warns US against selling hi-tech weapons to Taiwan

AFP, Washington

Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen warned the United States on Friday not to add fuel to the "flames" of the Taiwan conflict by selling hi-tech arms to the nationalist island.

Qian used a speech on the final day of his visit to Washington to publicly repudiate US criticisms of China on Taiwan, human rights and religious toleration.

He told members of the US-China Business Council that the Taiwan issue was China's internal affair, and needed no foreign intervention.

"If weapons were sold to that region, it would be like adding fuel to the flame," Qian said, in a clear reference to the Aegis anti-missile radar system which Bush is currently mulling whether to sell to Taiwan.

"There's already a spark there. If you pour oil and fuel over the spark, the spark will turn into a great flame."

"We don't want to see (the) flame of war there."

Bush told reporters at his meeting with Qian on Thursday at the White House that his administration would live up to its obligations under US law to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself.

But he said no decisions had yet been made on the makeup of an arms package Washington is expected to put together for Taiwan in April.

Qian said that Beijing allowed religious freedom to genuine organisations, but launched a fierce attack on the banned Falungong spiritual movement, which many observers believe represents the sole challenge to the

authority of the communist government.

Branding Falungong as a "cult that ruins families and human lives," Qian argued that the group had been outlawed to safeguard the freedom of other Chinese including Protestants and Catholics.

On Thursday, Bush told Qian that it would be "much easier" to deal with China if it respected religious freedom. The United States and rights organisations say Beijing persecutes thousands of followers of all but a handful of state-sanctioned creeds.

In his speech, Qian also took issue with critics of China's human rights record, telling them that progress could only be made "step by step."

"Never before has the human rights situation in China been so good. And it is still improving," he said, adding that China had managed to lift 200 million people out of poverty in two decades.

"Today the Chinese people enjoy services and opportunities in medical care, employment, education and training that they never had before."

The US State Department said in its latest human rights report that the human rights situation in China was getting worse, a statement Qian appeared to have in mind in his speech.

US officials said that the Qian-Bush talks ranged over a wide area, and included discussions of North Korea, in the context of Asian security, and China's impending entry into the World Trade Organisation.

Bush told Qian he wanted good relations with China, despite a testy dialogue with Beijing in the first two months of his administration.



Chinese Vice-Premier Qian Qichen (L) confers with US Trade Representative Carla Hills (R) during a luncheon held by the National Committee on US-China Relations, the US-China Business Council, and the US-China Policy Foundation on Friday at the Willard Inter-Continental Hotel in Washington, DC. Qian's mission is seen as the culmination of a campaign by China to head off the sale of ships equipped with the advanced Aegis battle management system to Taiwan, which Beijing views as a renegade province.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) garlands newly elected Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Jana Krishnamurthi (R) during a function at the parliament annex in New Delhi yesterday. Krishnamurthi was appointed following the resignation of his predecessor Bangaru Laxman, over a damaging arms bribery scandal, which involved several top-level defence ministry and army officials.

BJP elects new leader after bribery scam

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalists yesterday elected a new leader in the wake of a bribery scandal which has left India's coalition government in turmoil.

Bangaru Laxman stepped down as BJP party president after he was secretly filmed apparently accepting wads of money from journalists posing as arms dealers.

He did not attend the election of Jana Krishnamurthi as his successor, officials said.

They said Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani proposed the name of Krishnamurthi, who was then unanimously elected to hold office until 2003.

Laxman, who is now shunned by even his close followers, said his presence could have cast a shadow on the two-day BJP conclave set up to name the party's new leader.

"I am not attending the (BJP) national executive to enable members to deliberate and discuss matters relating to the so-called expose in a free and frank manner in my absence," Laxman said.

BJP leaders at the meeting were also considering steps to boost the sagging morale of their followers and devise strategies to salvage the image of the BJP, dented by the politically-explosive arms bribery scandal.

India's parliament has been paralysed

since the scandal, dubbed Armsgate by the media, erupted March 13. It follows a website's publication of a video showing politicians and defence officials allegedly accepting bribes from journalists posing as arms dealers.

Laxman quit after the video showed him accepting money. Defence Minister George Fernandes bowed out after Teheika.com implicated his Samata Party chief Jaya Jaitley in the scandal.

The BJP after the election said former president Laxman was a victim of a conspiracy to tarnish the party's image, as its newly-elected BJP president attacked the Congress party for seeking the Hindu nationalist government's ouster over the scandal.

"The hysterical reaction of Congress president (Sonia Gandhi) to the Teheika.com allegations does not behave a responsible leader of a responsible opposition party," Krishnamurthi said.

"Blind opposition, intense hatred for the BJP, unbridled ambition for power, irresponsible leadership, which flouts with impunity democratic norms and traditions, have become hallmarks of the Congress Party," he said.

Added BJP party spokesman Narendra Modi: "It is a plot against the BJP to sully its image and we are sure the enquiries ordered in the expose will bring out the truth."

Violence flares in Gaza Strip as Israel plans new settlement

AFP, Gaza City

A Palestinian was killed by Israeli troops near a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip Friday, as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government risked throwing fuel on the fire by proposing to build yet another settlement in the Palestinian territories.

Only hours after Sharon returned from the United States, where he repeated that there would be no peace talks as long as violence continues, Osama Hassan Selim, a 25-year-old Palestinian security officer, was shot dead by the Israeli army in Deir al-Balah in the southern Gaza Strip near the Kfar Darom settlement, Palestinian medical sources said.

His death brought to 443 the number of people killed since violence broke out in the region nearly six months ago, most of them Palestinians.

Another 36 Palestinians were wounded as demonstrators and Israeli troops clashed around the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In the evening, a convoy carrying Amnesty International secretary general Pierre Sane was fired on by an Israeli army stun grenade as it toured the southern Gaza Strip, an official from the human rights organisation said.

Kamal Samari, who was travelling with Sane, said the attack, which did not injure anyone, "looked like it was deliberate."

"If they fire grenades when we're here, it's not hard to imagine what they do when we're not here," Samari told AFP.

Upon his return from the United States on Thursday, Sharon said he had won US backing for his refusal to negotiate with the Palestinians under fire.

"There will be no negotiations under pressure and violence," Sharon said at the end of his trip.

But meanwhile, the Israeli housing ministry, led by right-wing Israel B'Aliya party leader Nathan Sharansky, said it had proposed construction of yet another Jewish settlement, southwest of Jerusalem.

Although it said the move will require approvals from other agencies and could take years to carry out, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's top adviser Nabil Abu Rudeina denounced the plans for 6,000 new Jewish homes in the West Bank, saying that "peace and settlement-building do not go together."

Some 200,000 Jewish settlers already live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which Israel captured in 1967, and another 200,000 Israelis live in east Jerusalem, which the Jewish state annexed in a move not recognised by the international community.

Jewish settlements are the most frequent targets of Palestinian attacks.

The armed wing of the Islamic militant movement Hamas on Friday claimed three separate mortar attacks on the Gaza Strip settlements in the past week, in its first admission it possesses such weapons.

Macedonia ready to strike Albanian rebels

West urges restraint

REUTERS, Skopje

Macedonia levelled the threat of imminent military action against ethnic Albanian guerillas as Western leaders backed Skopje but urged the ethnically-mixed Balkan state to seek a political solution to the crisis.

With the country's military power bolstered by the arrival of two helicopter gunships, Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski said the armed forces were ready to move at the word of their commanders.

"That may be in an hour, a day or a week," he said on Friday as the Russian made Mi-24 helicopters arrived at Skopje airport from Ukraine.

Macedonian government spokesman Antonio Milosovski warned civilians to pack up and leave the hillsides above the north-western town of Tetovo where security forces have been blasting suspected rebel positions for almost 10 days.

The European Union and the NATO military alliance voiced strong political support for the Skopje government, which is faced with its worst crisis since independence

from old socialist Yugoslavia a decade ago.

But they also urged it to show restraint in dealing with the rebels, who say they are fighting to improve the rights of the country's large ethnic Albanian minority.

Foreign ministers of the 15 European Union States and Russia, meeting at an EU summit in Stockholm, said a political settlement would be the only lasting solution to the insurgency which has triggered fears of a new Balkan war.

"It is extremely important that the government use proportional violence and not take any offensive military action because that would only damage their own interests," said Foreign Minister Anna Lindh of current EU president Sweden.

NATO Secretary-General George Robertson took a similar line, saying Macedonia had isolated the rebels and should take an early political initiative to address Albanian grievances.

"I hope the Macedonians will continue to be restrained and not engage in an unnecessary military confrontation with these people and focus on uniting the country," he said.

14 killed in bomb blasts in Russia

West urges restraint

AP, Moscow

At least 14 people were killed and more than 70 were wounded in three bomb blasts yesterday in southern Russia, police officials said.

Twelve people were killed and 72 were wounded when a bomb exploded near the entrance of a farmers' market in the city of Mineralnye Vody, a spokesman for the city Interior Ministry said.

A nearly simultaneous blast in the nearby town of Yessentuki in the Stavropol region injured 12, police officials said, and two Interior Ministry servicemen were killed in a third explosion in the Karachayevo-Cherkessia region.

Mineralnye Vody, Yessentuki and Karachayevo-Cherkessia are located just northwest of the break-away Republic of Chechnya.

Two Interior Ministry inspectors were killed when explosives found in a car on a highway in the Karachayevo-Cherkessia region detonated.

In the town of Yessentuki, 12 people were injured when a bomb exploded Saturday morning in the entranceway of the highway police department.

The three blasts occurred within minutes of each other at 10 am.

International spying continues despite end of Cold War

AFP, Washington

Current outrage over discoveries of Russian intelligence gathering in the United States notwithstanding, international spying in military, economic and technological arenas continues, more than 10 years after the end of the Cold War.

The recent arrest of an FBI agent who allegedly spied for Russia for some 15 years, compounded by Russian and US decisions to expel diplomats as a consequence of his actions, only fuel experts' contentions that despite the overt ending of the Cold War, a shadow war continues.

"Even in the post-Cold War era, intelligence gathering goes on. Nobody's surprised by that," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

The Russian spy network in the United States, undoubtedly interested in myriad secrets being developed by the US superpower, appears to be better established than the US presence in Moscow, as Washington has less to learn from the impoverished country with a diminished military capacity, specialists opine.

"There are surely a minimum of 200 to 400 Russian spies under some kind of official cover," said Fritz Ermath, a former chairman of the US National Intelligence Council, attributing the increased spy presence to the ascension of former Russian intelligence operatives to positions in the Kremlin, not the least of whom is President Vladimir Putin, himself a former KGB agent.

Florida Republican Porter Goss, a former CIA agent and current chair of the US House of Representatives' intelligence committee, on Thursday denounced the exponential increase in the size of the Russian intelligence-gathering community over the past decade.

Goss said that, even with the February 18 arrest of FBI agent Robert Hanssen and the 1994 arrest of top-level Central Intelligence Agency operative Aldrich Ames, a top-level Russian mole is still informing on the US government.

Jim Woolsey, who served as CIA director from 1991 to 1993, said the Russians have a hankering for US technology, similar to that seen during the Soviet era, when secret information was used to build warplanes. But he was hard-pressed to come up with anything the Russians have that the United States might still need.

"Basically, Cold War thinking is almost entirely from the Russian side," he told AFP. "We don't spend a lot of time thinking 'What is Russia going to do next?' the way we did the Soviet Union. They're not particularly a threat." Nevertheless, the United States will continue to covertly monitor Russia because of its relations with other countries, specifically North Korea and Iraq, Woolsey said.

"The successor states from the Soviet Union have a lot of nuclear weapons, a lot of military technology, and we sure don't want (that) shipped to countries like Iraq, Iran or North Korea."