

US N-sub's port call without notice irks Japan

AP, Tokyo

Japan's foreign minister demanded an explanation yesterday for a US nuclear-powered submarine's entry into a southwestern port without advance notice...

"Until I receive the report, I cannot cooperate with US nuclear submarines making port calls," Yohei Kono told reporters.

The 6,200-ton Chicago entered Sasebo port, 982 kilometers (609 miles), southwest of Tokyo, on Monday, but US military officials had only told the city government that it would stop outside the port...

The submarine arrived from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

8 policemen killed in Nepali road accident

AFP, Kathmandu

Eight policemen were killed and 16 others injured when their bus fell 200 metres (650 ft) off a cliff yesterday, Home Ministry sources said.

The bus, carrying the 24 police guards, was heading towards Bhaluwang village from Palpa district 280 km west of Kathmandu, to reinforce a police checkpoint, the sources said.

According to the source, eight policemen died at the crash site.

Six of the injured were in serious conditions and air lifted to Kathmandu for treatment.

The eight other injured policemen were treated locally.

Japan okays textbook despite protests

AFP, Tokyo

Japan approved yesterday for use in schools a controversial history textbook condemned by other Asian nations for glossing over wartime atrocities, education ministry officials said.

"We have just passed it" after the publisher made more than 100 changes ordered by the education ministry, said a ministry official.

Howler details of controversial passages in the 350-page textbook, published by Fuso Publishing Co., confirmed to AFP by the ministry, showed a number remained.

One passage which prompted outrage in earlier leaked drafts still avoided using the word "invasion" in relation to Japan's colonial aggression in Korea and China.

Attack on UN employees in Burundi

AFP, Bujumbura

Three drivers for the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and an employee of the charity Action Aid were wounded in an attack on a relief convoy in central Burundi, the WFP announced yesterday.

Two WFP lorries and several cars used by non-governmental organisations were attacked at 10:00 am (14:00 BST) on Monday at Makebuko in Gitega province, the food agency said.

The three WFP drivers, one of whom was seriously injured, included two men from Burundi and one from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Action Aid worker is a Burundian woman, the WFP stated.

Taliban deny sale of Bamiyan Buddha pieces

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's Taliban regime yesterday dismissed media reports that pieces of the ancient Buddha statues dynamited by the ruling militia last month were smuggled out for sale in neighbouring Pakistan.

Taliban soldiers turned the pieces of the blown up Buddha statues into powder and smugglers could not infiltrate the central Afghan city of Bamiyan, Information and Culture Minister Qudratullah Jamal said.

"We have turned them into dust. Even their dust has been turned into dust," Jamal told reporters.

He said pieces of scores of other statues destroyed in Kabul museum and other parts of the country had also been ground into dust.

Reports quoting London's Sunday Telegraph said parts of the colossal statues had been smuggled out and put on sale in the bordering Pakistani city of Peshawar.

US fully responsible for spy plane crisis: Jiang

AFP, Beijing

China's President Jiang Zemin yesterday placed full blame for a collision between a US spy plane and a Chinese jet squarely on the United States and demanded an end to surveillance flights close to Chinese territory.

"The responsibility fully lies with the American side, we have full evidence for that," Jiang was quoted as saying by foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao.

"It is the US plane, in violation of flying rules, that made dangerous moves, bumped into and destroyed our plane and caused our pilot (to go) missing," he said.

"We don't know why the US side conducts frequent reconnaissance so close to China," Zhu also quoted Jiang as saying. "The United States should stop such flights."

Jiang made the remarks in talks Tuesday with visiting Prime Minister Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al-Thani of Qatar, Zhu said.

Jiang also expressed concern over the missing Chinese pilot, who parachuted from his F-8 fighter jet after the collision.

"What is most precious is human life," Zhu said. Search teams were still scouring the South China Sea looking for the pilot.

US President George Bush has demanded the immediate release of the crew and the return of the airplane, while the top US military attaché to China arrived in Hainan Monday to begin negotiations with the Chinese military on the crew's release.

"We demand the US side come to fully recognise the seriousness of this incident, admit its mistakes, assume responsibility and take effective measures to prevent similar incidents from happening again," spokesman Zhu said. "China is the victim."

Zhu said the US airplane "illegally entered into China's airspace" and landed at a Chinese airport, "seriously violating international and Chinese law."

He refused to answer questions on whether China would confiscate the high tech plane or criminally try the US crew.

"Investigations are ongoing," he said, while the outcome of the incident depended on how China "reacted" to US demands on the "attitude of the US."

However, due to the legal violations, China had the full right to investigate the incident in accordance with its own laws, Zhu said, while denying American claims that the plane enjoyed "sovereign immunity" from Chinese law.

"There is no question of immunity at all," he said in response to a question on whether Chinese military officials had boarded the plane.



An Israeli missile explodes next to the Paradise hotel in the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Monday. An Israeli soldier died and 10 Palestinians were wounded in heavy fighting that erupted in Bethlehem.

Israeli army bulldozes Force 17 post in Gaza

Peres sidelines EU in ME peace process

AFP, Gaza City

The Israeli army entered areas in the southern Gaza Strip under full Palestinian control overnight and razed an outpost of the elite Force 17 guard, a Palestinian security source told the agency yesterday.

Around 100 Israeli soldiers, four tanks and two army bulldozers entered the Khan Yunis region where the two sides exchanged fire for around an hour as the small outpost was bulldozed, said the source who asked not to be identified.

The Force 17 post was situated in the al-Amal region of Khan Yunis near the Gush Katif Jewish settlement bloc, the source said, adding that no one was hurt in the shooting.

The area is part of more than 60 percent of the Gaza Strip which falls under full Palestinian security and administrative control.

carrying out a string of anti-Israeli attacks, attacked the force's positions in Gaza City and Ramallah with helicopter gunships last week, killing one of its members.

Israeli commandos also staged a raid into the West Bank and abducted five Force 17 men.

Three of them were later released, after they were cleared of "terrorist" involvement, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office said in a statement Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres politely deflated yesterday the European Union's desire for an enhanced role mediating between the Israelis and Palestinians, saying Washington remained Israel's peace broker of choice.

Europe has an "exceedingly important role" to play in the region, Peres told reporters here after meeting Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson, adding that "without Europe, the Palestinians would not have an administration."

'LTTE planning massive attack after truce'

AP, Colombo

The government claimed yesterday it had intelligence information that Tamil Tiger rebels are planning a massive attack in eastern Sri Lanka when their unilateral ceasefire ends April 24.

The claim, attributed to unidentified intelligence sources, was published in the state-run Daily News on Tuesday.

There was no confirmation. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are outlawed in Sri Lanka and their Internet site carried no mention of war strategy.

Most of the country's 71-year civil war has been fought in the north where Tamils are in the majority. The east, where Tamils have only a slight majority over Muslims and Sinhalese, has been relatively calm, although the rebels maintain a sizeable presence there.

Two weeks ago, the air force carried out a massive bombing raid on a rebel base in the east, killing 18 and wounding 30 rebels.

The LTTE high command in the east has ordered the Tiger rank and file to prepare for a massive attack against security forces," after April 24, the Daily News said in a front page story.

The rebels declared the ceasefire at the beginning of the year, saying they wanted to give a Norwegian-backed peace plan a chance.

The government has rejected the ceasefire, saying it was a ploy by the rebels to regroup.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe is set to visit Norway amid moves by Oslo to broker peace between Tamil rebels and the Colombo government, officials said yesterday.

Wickremesinghe was due to leave next week at the invitation of the Norwegian government, official sources here said.

It was not immediately clear if his visit was directly linked to Norway's attempts to bring the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government to the peace negotiating table.

Thai PM, his wife accused of gross dishonesty

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his wife were accused of gross dishonesty yesterday as the nation's anti-graft organisation fired the opening salvo in an historic corruption hearing.

The National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) has indicted the billionaire politician for deliberately failing to make a full disclosure of his assets during a three-month stint as deputy premier in 1997.

He now faces a long and bruising battle in the Constitutional Court to overturn the indictment, or face a five-year ban from politics that would see him booted out of office just months after a landslide election victory.

NCCC secretary general Kjanarong Chanthich opened the unprecedented hearing with a detailed account of how Thaksin filed three false declarations.

UN HR envoy meets top Myanmar general

AP, Yangon

The first UN human rights official allowed into Myanmar in five years met with a top general at the start of a groundbreaking visit that signals the ruling military junta's increasing openness.

Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, a Brazilian politics professor, said he had a "very pleasant" meeting with Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, secretary one of the ruling State Peace and Development Council. He earlier called on Foreign Minister Win Aung.

Pinheiro is due to meet with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been kept under virtual house arrest since Sept. 22 after defying a travel ban.

In brief comments to reporters, Pinheiro described his visit as "exploratory." He added that the schedule for his meeting with Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her democracy struggle, was not yet set.

"I hope that I'll have the privilege to have missions in this country," he said.

Further details of his trip, including its duration, were not immediately known. Neither the government nor the United Nations Development Programme in Yangon issued statements.

Pinheiro was named UN human rights rapporteur in February, replacing Rajsoomer Lallah, a Mauritian judge who resigned in November, claiming he did not have the resources to carry out his task. His predecessor, Japanese professor Yoizo Yokota, resigned for similar reasons.

The junta never allowed Lallah, who took the job in 1996, to visit the country, accusing him of being unfairly critical of the regime.

US F-16 jet crashes during training flight over Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A US fighter jet crashed during training in northern Japan yesterday, and the pilot ejected safely, Japanese police and US military said.

"An F-16, belonging to the US Air Force Base in Misawa (in Aomori Prefecture), crashed during training around 16:30 (13:30 BST) near the Amagatori firing-range in Misawa City during practice," said an Aomori police spokesman.

Misawa Base, home of the 35th Fighter Wing, said in a statement that there was one person on board the aircraft who ejected safely and had been rescued.

Misawa is located 570 km north of Tokyo. The firing range belongs to the US base, and there was no immediate report of injuries or damage to buildings, the police spokesman said.

UN HR envoy meets top Myanmar general

AP, Yangon

The first UN human rights official allowed into Myanmar in five years met with a top general at the start of a groundbreaking visit that signals the ruling military junta's increasing openness.

Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, a Brazilian politics professor, said he had a "very pleasant" meeting with Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, secretary one of the ruling State Peace and Development Council. He earlier called on Foreign Minister Win Aung.

Pinheiro is due to meet with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been kept under virtual house arrest since Sept. 22 after defying a travel ban.

In brief comments to reporters, Pinheiro described his visit as "exploratory." He added that the schedule for his meeting with Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her democracy struggle, was not yet set.



A newly wed couple, unable to find public transport, opt to walk as burnt-out government buses sit in a New Delhi bus station yesterday. Furious commuters torched buses amid a transport meltdown in India's capital as a country's best-selling daily called for a public campaign of disobedience. Most of the buses stay off the roads in line with India's Supreme Court's anti-pollution ruling which bans diesel and petrol-run passenger vehicles from April 1.

Violence flares in Delhi amid transport chaos

AFP, New Delhi

Police fired in the air as violence flared in the Indian capital New Delhi yesterday, with furious commuters torching buses to protest a public transport meltdown caused by a ban on polluting vehicles.

Even before the main morning rush hour, the city was in chaos, with buses largely absent from the streets and the drastically diminished number of taxis and auto-rickshaws charging extortionate prices.

Commuter frustration boiled over into violence, with angry mobs in south Delhi torching six buses after forcing passengers to disembark.

In the same area was a line of more than 20 empty buses with all their windows smashed and tyres punctured.

"Around 2,000 commuters started burning buses and pelting stones," said South Delhi Joint Police Commissioner Amod Kanth, who said eight of his officers were injured.

"In the end, shots were fired in the air to disperse the crowd," Kanth told AFP, adding that 50 people had been arrested across Delhi.

The mayhem stems from a 1998 Supreme Court order requiring all public transport vehicles to convert from petrol to compressed natural gas (CNG) by April 1 this year.

The ruling has cut the number of buses operating in the capital from 12,500 to a little more than 1,000, while taxi and auto fleets have been similarly shredded.

With Monday a religious holiday, Tuesday was the first full working day since the court order came into force.

Thousands of commuters who left home early received little reward for their foresight, with most stranded helplessly at bus stops around the city.

Estrada faces arrest as court rejects appeal against ouster

AFP, Manila

The Philippines' Supreme Court yesterday threw out former president Joseph Estrada's appeal against his removal from office, clearing the way for him to be charged in court with corruption.

The 13 Supreme Court justices voted unanimously to defend a ruling they made last month in which they upheld the legitimacy of new president Gloria Arroyo, who took power after Estrada was ousted in a military-backed popular revolt in January.

Estrada, 63, had argued that he remained the legitimate president and thus retained immunity from prosecution.

The government has already prepared against Estrada an array of corruption charges, including plunder which is punishable by death if found guilty.

In his March 20 appeal against the Supreme Court decision, the disgraced former movie action star maintained that he was illegally ousted.

Estrada also strongly questioned the court's use of a published diary of his former chief aide Edgardo Angara in which he was interpreted to have effectively stepped down from office at the height of the popular uprising.

But in a 43-page resolution, the highest court in the Philippines stressed that the Angara diary provided facts that could not be "inadmissible as evidence."

The court does not allow a second motion for reconsideration, virtually making the decision final and executory.

Hubble Telescope spots most-distant supernova

AP, Denver

The Hubble Space Telescope, peering 10 billion years back in time to when the universe was in its adolescence, has spotted the most distant exploding star ever observed.

Researchers said the discovery bolsters the controversial theory that mysterious "dark energy" is accelerating the expansion of the cosmos.

Invisible and poorly understood, dark energy might account for as much as two-thirds of space. Proposed a century ago by Einstein, it may counteract more familiar forces such as gravity.

The supernova, barely discernible with the most powerful instruments, provides clues to dark energy. While dim, the dying star gleams brighter and moves differently than it would if the universe had expanded at a steady rate since the beginning of time.

The Hubble finding is prompting researchers to rethink how the universe works.

"(Dark energy) is every bit as amazing as black holes," said University of Chicago cosmologist Michael Turner in a briefing at NASA's Washington headquarters.

"It controls the density of nature. It's the key to understanding how all of nature's particles and forces fit together."

Denounced as "illegal" by Media-MOST, the financially-troubled parent company of NTV, the sweeping change forced by its main shareholder will lead to state editorial control at the station, journalists there warned.

In a statement read out on NTV, the group of journalists said they were "well aware that the ultimate goal of the meeting and of all the moves of the authorities against NTV is to establish full political control" over it.

They added that "Russian President Vladimir Putin is informed of what is going on and bears responsibility for the consequences."

NATO resorts to force without seeking UN approval: Putin

AFP, Moscow

NATO is flying in the face of international opinion when it resorts to force without seeking UN Security Council approval, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned yesterday.

"The problem with NATO is that this organisation takes no account of the international community and international agreements when it takes its decisions," Putin said in his annual state-of-the-nation address to a joint session of the Russian parliament.

The Russian leader warned: "The quality of our relations with the (western) alliance will depend on its respect for international law with regard to the use of force."

"Our position is simple: the only body that can approve the resort to force is the UN Security Council."

Russia strongly condemned NATO bombing raids against Yugoslavia in March-June 1999 and US and British air strikes against Iraq.

Meanwhile, War-torn Chechnya has not been brought under control despite 18 months of military crackdown, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday.

"Having completed its most important tasks, the army is leaving Chechnya, this is an important result," Putin said in a state-of-nation address to a joint session of parliament.

But he warned: "We have no right to succumb to euphoria. We have no right to hold false optimism. The threat of future crimes (being committed by Chechen rebels) is very high. I must say that today."

Senate approves reform on US campaign finance

AP, Washington

The Senate approved landmark legislation to reduce the influence of big money in political campaigns, capping a fierce, six-year struggle that catapulted Sen. John McCain to national prominence.

Monday's 59-41 vote set the stage for a battle in the House, the next in a series of hurdles for a bill that also must gain President George W. Bush's signature and withstand a promised court challenge to its constitutionality.

Bush will "look at it when it reaches his desk. It's still going through the legislative process," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

Jubilant supporters hailed the Senate's action as a signal that campaign finance laws are likely to be changed for the first time since the Watergate era.

"Average citizens are being deprived of the right of free speech when the megaphones are held by wealthy people," said McCain, an Arizona Republican who has often argued that the current system of unlimited "soft money" donations to the parties encourages corruption.

Sen. Russ Feingold of Wisconsin, the bill's leading Democratic supporter, said passage would "put a lasting mark on the record of democracy."

Opponents battled to the end against a measure they said was flawed. "The bill is fatally unconstitutional," said Sen. Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, calling it an infringement on free speech.



US Senator John McCain (L), R-AZ, and Russell Feingold (2nd L), D-WI, address the media after the US Senate passed their campaign finance reform bill on Monday in Washington, DC.

Iraqi opposition ready for dialogue with Washington

AFP, Dubai

Iraq's Iran-based opposition said in statements published yesterday that it was ready to open direct dialogue with the United States.

"We have no objection to a direct dialogue with the American administration," the head of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Mohammad Baqer Haakeem, told Al-Hayat newspaper.

"Why must the Iraqi opposition, facing up to all this repression (from the Baghdad regime), not speak with the American administration?" Hakim asked.

The whole world holds talks with the United States. The Palestinians, the Syrians and others... and the Islamic Republic of Iran holds dialogue through intermediaries," Hakim said.

The United States provides the Iraqi opposition with millions of dollars in aid that Congress has set aside to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

But the State Department said last month it was trying to increase the number of dissidents it funds beyond the London-based Iraqi National Congress (INC), a controversial umbrella group of exiles,