

Russians in India to testfire anti-aircraft missile

AFP, New Delhi

A team of Russian scientists flew into India to test-fire their new anti-aircraft guided missile called the OSA-AK in the eastern state of Orissa, a report said yesterday.

The Hindustan Times newspaper said a Russian Air Force aircraft IL-76 carried "sensitive cargo" from an airbase in Moscow to India's Chandipur test range facility overlooking the Bay of Bengal amid tight security.

"This is the first time that India has let out its missile test range facilities to a foreign country. Incidentally, there is no financial charge," said the Hindustan Times.

"And with that a new chapter in the history of Indo-Russian military co-operation has begun. What is significant is that the Russians have been given full access to India's Chandipur test range facility."

The newspaper quoted an official from the India's Defence Research and Development Organisation as saying the Russians were taking advantage of the facility to test-fire the OSA-AK in Indian conditions.

"We are not involved in the tests. All we are doing is providing the facility," the official told the newspaper.

Bush orders review of US spy programme

REUTERS, Washington

President George W. Bush has ordered a top-to-bottom review of US spy programmes to assess intelligence capabilities, future needs and where they can be streamlined, a White House official said on Friday.

Bush signed a national security presidential directive on May 9 directing CIA Director George Tenet to complete the review by the end of the summer, the official said.

"As with the case of the review of our defence strategy, the president needs to ensure that US intelligence capabilities are honed to serve us on a wide range of critical challenges that face us now and in the future," the White House official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

The review will be conducted across the entire intelligence community, which includes the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, which eavesdrops around the world using spy satellites, listening posts, and other methods.

In recent years, government officials have expressed concern over the NSA's ability to keep up with rapidly changing technological advances.

The CIA has found its resources spread over a wider region since the Cold War ended, with threats to American interests now seen coming from a variety of forces rather than the Soviet Union before it collapsed.

Congress has been pushing US intelligence agencies to improve turning the vast amount of information they gather into a form more useful for policymakers.

BJP leader shot dead

PTI, Hyderabad

Nizamabad district BJP president R Surrender was shot dead by two unidentified persons at Kamareddy town in Nizamabad district on Friday, police said.

Surrender was attacked by two motorcycle-borne assailants near his house just when he was about to board his jeep, police said.

The assailants, waiting for Surrender to come out of his house, fired indiscriminately at him, police said, adding that the involvement of Naxalites in the killing could not be ruled out.

One in 3 Britons won't vote in June elections

AFP, London

One in three people do not intend to vote in Britain's next general elections on June 7, according to an opinion poll released here yesterday.

The figure is the lowest forecast voter turnout since 1918, and if proved correct would be a blow to Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour party, which fears that low participation could erode its expected majority.

Of the 3,200 people questioned for the poll by the NOP institute, only 67 percent said they would take part, compared to the 72 percent turnout in 1997, when Blair came to power.

The poll suggests that 64 percent of people aged under 25 do not plan to vote, but that figure falls to 22 percent of people in the over-65 age bracket.

The poll comes just four days into campaigning for the early elections, which Blair called last Tuesday and which Labour is widely predicted to win comfortably.

Two Palestinians killed in Israeli helicopter attack

AFP, NABLUS, West Bank

An official of a Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction and a Palestinian policeman were killed during an attack yesterday by Israeli helicopter gunships in the northern West Bank town of Jenin, Palestinian medical sources said.

Motassem al-Sabagh, 25, was in a car parked close to the offices of the Palestinian governor of the autonomous Palestinian town of Jenin when it was hit by three rockets in an attack by four Israeli helicopters, witnesses said.

Sabagh, a member of Fatah's armed group Tanzim and apparently wanted by Israel, was said to have tried in vain to get out of the car before it was hit. He died of his wounds en route to a Nablus hospital, sources said.

In the same incident, a 21-year-old Palestinian policeman, Allam Jaludi, who was standing close to the car targeted by one of the helicopters, also died of injuries sustained in the attack, they said.

Thirteen other Palestinians were also injured.

An Israeli army spokesman refused to comment on the attack.

The two deaths takes the overall toll to 523 since the late-September eruption of fighting in Israel and the Palestinian territories. They comprise 429 Palestinians, 78 Israelis, 13 Israeli Arabs, two Romanians and one

German.

An Israeli military official has said that, on the instructions of armed forces chief of staff General Shaul Mofaz, Arafat's Fatah movement, Force 17 and Fatah's armed wing, known to the Israelis as Tanzim, were henceforth considered "hostile organisations".

The seven-month-old Palestinian uprising is increasingly turning to armed attacks against Israelis. That has prompted Israeli retaliation with tanks, helicopters and gunships on the Gaza Strip as well as on the West Bank.

In the space of 24 hours, the Israeli army has made five incursions into the Gaza Strip to hit at Palestinian police posts they say are being used for attacks on Israeli targets.

Overnight Thursday, Israel fired six shells into a post of Force 17 -- Arafat's elite guard -- inside the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian police official said.

Israeli anti-tank missiles later pounded Palestinian security headquarters and the offices of Fatah in Gaza City, injuring some 20 people, mostly civilians, after a bomb blast killed two Romanians migrant workers repairing a security fence on the edge of the Gaza Strip.

Israeli army spokesman General Ron Kitrey told AFP the army would mount its raids "systematically" after each Palestinian attack.

Prosecutors drop five criminal charges against Anwar

AP, Kuala Lumpur

Prosecutors dropped five criminal charges against Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim yesterday, but the jailed politician said he would rather have been tried so he could expose a conspiracy against him.

Wearing braces around his neck and waist because of a back injury, Anwar was brought in a wheelchair from his prison cell to a makeshift courtroom in an office at the Sungai Buloh prison near Kuala Lumpur for Saturday's hearing.

Plans to bring him to a regular court in the city was cancelled because he is too ill to travel.

The hearing lasted less than five minutes. Prosecutor Azhar Abdul Hamid told Judge Augustine Paul that "the prosecution at this time is withdrawing all five remaining charges against the accused."

Paul then formally acquitted Anwar of the charges and released him back to prison authorities.

The ruling does not alter separate convictions for corruption and sodomy, for which Anwar is currently serving prison terms totalling 15 years.



Anwar's politician wife and children, who were present in the cramped courtroom, looked relieved at the verdict and embraced him before entering another room for a private meeting.

Anwar was defiant, saying he wanted to face trial to prove his innocence.

"It was a pleasant surprise, but I would have rather faced them in court as I believe all these charges

are trumped up," Anwar said.

Outside the prison, two trucks mounted with water cannons and four trucks loaded with riot police protected the entrance. About 10 Anwar supporters gathered, but there was no violence.

The five charges date back to 1998, when Anwar was arrested shortly after being fired from Cabinet by his former mentor, Malaysia's longtime Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and charged with multiple counts of corruption and sodomy. At two trials, he was tried for only four counts of corruption and one count of sodomy.

The court last month set a date for a prosecutors to say whether they would pursue the outstanding charges against Anwar, or drop them. The charges were four counts of sodomy and one of corruption. Each sodomy conviction carries a maximum 15-year prison term; the heaviest sentence for corruption is 14 years.

Anwar claims the charges against him were concocted to prevent him from challenging Mahathir, who denies a conspiracy.



PHOTO: AFP

Triamul Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee shakes hands with her party supporters outside a TMC office at Khardaha, 20 km from Kolkata, yesterday. Election commissioner has ordered re-polling in some 90 centres in Khardaha following complaints of ballot snatching and other electoral malpractice.

Confusion reigns over India's stance on US missile defence

AFP, New Delhi

Confusion persisted Saturday over India's position on the planned US National Missile Defence (NMD) system, a day after US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage held talks in New Delhi.

Indian media put out conflicting reports about New Delhi's official stance on the controversial project, designed to protect the US from missile attacks by what Washington considers "rogue states".

The Times of India newspaper announced "India tempers support" while in contrast the Hindu reported "Indian PM welcomes the US initiative".

"Though domestic criticism has forced the government to temper its initial effusive support, it chose yet again to lavish praise on selective elements of the new strategy, while steering clear of NMD," said the Times of India.

The Hindu, however, reported that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had welcomed U.S. President George W. Bush's offer of consultations with allies and major powers on a new framework of security.

"India is among the few countries which have enthusiastically welcomed Bush's proposal... Despite the intense domestic criticism of its effusive support to Mr Bush, the government stood its ground and welcomed the American proposals," reported the Hindu.

The confusion has been reflected in the utterances of the Indian government, which firstly gave the impression

of endorsing the idea of the system, which it had opposed earlier.

This reaction came within hours of Bush's announcement of the proposal to set up a 60 billion dollar NMD, leading to an eventual break from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972.

However 48 hours later at a joint press conference with the visiting Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov, Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh took a different line, warning Washington against any attempt to disturb existing arms control mechanisms. The Indian Express on Saturday highlighted Singh's stand and said India had aligned itself more closely with the Russian stand on NMD during Armitage's visit.

"New Delhi emphasised the need to not unilaterally abrogate bilateral compacts like the ABM Treaty of 1972 signed between the US and Russia," said the Indian Express.

On Friday, Russia rejected Washington's arguments for the NMD project, but the US side pledged to continue efforts to win over Russian critics.

The Indian media also focused heavily Saturday on whether the "rogue states" for Washington included Pakistan, which has been accused by New Delhi of sponsoring cross border terrorism.

The Hindu noted that Armitage "stopped short of directly naming Pakistan as a rogue state."

US warns of terrorist threats

AFP, Washington

The United States said late Friday it had received credible information about terrorist threats against American targets and warned US citizens around the world of possible attacks by associates of suspected Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden.

"The United States has learned that American citizens abroad may be the target of a terrorist threat from extremist groups with links to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organisation," the State Department said in a statement labelled "world-wide caution."

"In the past, such individuals have not distinguished between official and civilian targets," it said, adding that Washington took the information "seriously" and that US diplomatic and other government buildings abroad were being kept in a "heightened state of alert."

It called on Americans to increase security precautions such as varying routes of travel and keeping a low profile.

The statement came a day after a jury in New York began deliberations in the trial of the four men in connection with the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in East Africa.

Verdicts in the case are likely early next week, according to lawyers and observers.

Italy goes to polls today

AFP, Rome

Candidates were wooing undecided voters Friday as campaigning drew to an end for Italian general elections in which a centre-right alliance led by controversial media magnate Silvio Berlusconi hopes to wrest power from the centre-left government.

With Sunday's legislative and local elections fast approaching, leaders of Berlusconi's House of Freedom alliance, confident of taking power, were to attend a rally at Rome's central Piazza del Popolo square late Friday.

Center-left Olive Tree candidates wound up their campaign separately, with leader Francesco Rutelli, 46, due to attend a rally in Naples late Friday while other Olive Tree candidates were in Tuscany and other regions.

More than eight million Italians of a total electorate of 49 million stayed away from polling booths in the last parliamentary election in 1996 and more than 14 million in European elections three years later.

Analysts expect a turnout between the two figures Sunday and a possible tie after the centre-right lead in opinion polls shrank to a mere four percentage points before a survey ban became effective on April 28.

Execution of Oklahoma City bomber postponed

AFP, Washington

US Attorney General John Ashcroft announced he was postponing the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh Friday in order to give McVeigh's lawyers an opportunity to review newly-discovered evidence.

Attorney General John Ashcroft said he was reluctantly delaying McVeigh's death until June 11 in order to give the bomber's defence team a chance to review 200 FBI documents which should have been given to them prior to his 1997 trial.

Insisting that the documents in no way exonerated the 33-year-old former Gulf War veteran, Ashcroft said the delay was nevertheless imperative in order for justice to be seen to be done.

"Timothy McVeigh, by his own admission, is guilty of an act of terrorism that stole life from 168 innocent Americans, and these documents do not contradict the jury's verdict in the case," he told a news conference.

"But if any questions or doubts remain about this case, it would cast a permanent cloud over justice, diminishing its value and questioning its integrity."

McVeigh was scheduled to die next Wednesday, May 16, more than six years after he blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people in the worst act of terrorism ever seen on US soil.

But it emerged Thursday that thousands of pages of evidence compiled by FBI agents during the investigation into the attack had not been handed over to McVeigh's defence team as agreed under a 1996 disclosure agreement between them and defence lawyers.

The documents contain witness testimony about a man reportedly seen with McVeigh in the days before the bombing, and specifically when he rented the infamous Ryder truck which transported the bomb, said Richard Burr, a lawyer advising McVeigh's legal team.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji (C) shares a smile with Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf (L) while signing a visitor's book at a tourist spot in Islamabad yesterday. Zhu, who arrived here on May 11, visited a tourist spot at Shakarpirayan and grand Shah Faisal mosque in the capital city along his wife Lao An (R). Sabah Musharraf, wife of General Musharraf, is on second right.

Plan to make Hong Kong a non-smoking city

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong could become an almost completely non-smoking city, with tobacco banned even in bars and nightclubs under new government proposals, a report said yesterday.

The plans are set out in a discussion paper scheduled to be tabled on Monday to the health services panel of the territory's parliament, the Legislative Council, the South China Morning Post reported.

The proposed amendments to the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance, include a call for wide-reaching bans on smoking in offices, shops and factories.

The paper will seek to turn restaurants, bars and karaoke bars as well as school, universities and indoor workplaces into no-smoking zones, the newspaper said.

The plan is to gradually extend the ban to other public indoor entertainment establishments including even nightclubs, bath-houses and parlours.

Managers would be empowered to enforce the law, including issuing verbal warnings and calling the police if warnings were not heeded.

Eventually private homes would be virtually the only indoor place where smoking was permitted.

Jimmy Yuen, a consultant for the territory's Occupational Safety and Health Council, raised con-

cerns the government was moving too quickly with the plans.

He pointed out restrictions on restaurants were already in place but "enforcement was not satisfactory and it is important to sort out these problems before introducing full across-the-board bans".

Legislation currently requires restaurants with more than 200 seats to designate a third of their floor space as non-smoking areas. The discussion paper wants to prohibit smoking in all restaurants, regardless of size.

Yuen also questioned the ability of managers to enforce smoking bans in offices and public places, fearing this could cause run-ins with patrons.

The government needed to carry out more "assessments and investigation before pushing through the proposal," he added.

Terry Lee, manager of the Pepperoni's Pizza restaurant, said that if the government attempted to enforce a complete smoking ban then "definitely business would suffer" as many customers liked to "order coffee and have a cigarette after their meals".

Hong Kong currently has no legislation regulating smoking in indoor workplaces.

A survey by the Census and Statistics Department recently found that 733,000 employees were subjected to passive smoking.

80 killed in fighting, Somali warlord claims

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali warlord Hussein Mohamed Aidid claimed yesterday that 80 people, including 33 of his bodyguards, were killed in fighting which he alleged was sparked by a bid to assassinate him by the transitional government here.

Heavy clashes pitting militiamen loyal to Aidid against Transitional National Government (TNG) fighters erupted Friday afternoon and continued into the night.

"Some 80 people were killed including civilians and the attackers. Around 200 were wounded," Aidid told AFP in an interview at his office here.

His Somali National Alliance (SNA) faction earlier put the death toll at 22 and more than 40 wounded.

Aidid said 33 of his bodyguards travelling in a car and a pick-up truck died when the vehicles were hit by anti-tank fire or were machine-gunned in what he described as an unprovoked attack by TNG fighters.

"The attackers were well-trained and used sophisticated weapons, but my supporters overwhelmed them after a long fight," Aidid said. "Thirty technicals (trucks with mounted guns) took part in the fighting," he added.

"The proposal to kill me came from Djibouti and two Arab countries. Radical Islamists in Somalia were also part of the planned attack to assassinate me," Aidid charged, without naming the two other countries allegedly involved.