



PHOTO: AFP

This image released by International Launch Services (ILS) shows a Russian-built Proton K rocket successfully launching the PAS-10 communications satellite for PanAmSat Corp from Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, on Monday. The liftoff, marking the first mission of the year for International Launch Services (ILS) from Baikonur's Pad 23 put a communications satellite into geosynchronous transfer orbit providing communications services in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Congress vows to resolve insurgency problem in Assam

AP, Gauhati

Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's Congress party, which won this week's legislative polls in the northeastern Assam state, promised yesterday to resolve a decade-long separatist insurgency.

"Solving the insurgency problem will top my government's agenda. Without peace, the state will continue to be economically stagnant," Assam Congress chief Tarun Gogoi, told The Associated Press.

The Congress party won the May 10 state elections, securing 71 seats in the 126-member legislature, defeating the ruling Asom Gana Parishad, which won just 38 seats.

The newly elected Congress lawmakers on Wednesday formally elected Gogoi, 65, as their leader to head the new state government. Gogoi and several of his ministers will be sworn in Friday.

Political events in remote Assam may not have a direct bearing on Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's ruling coalition government, but his Bharatiya Janata Party was a partner of the AGP in the polls.

The AGP-BJP poor performance is being widely seen as a reflection of the parties' failure to end the insurgency, which has claimed over 10,000 lives in the past decade.

Sonia Gandhi, the widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, heads the Congress party, which won in three of the five states that held provincial elections on May 10.

Assam, with 26 million people, lies sandwiched between India's neighbours, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Since 1979, it has been the scene of a violent bush war led by the United Liberation Front of Asom, or Ulf, which accuses the federal government of exploiting Assam's rich timber, oil and other natural resources while neglecting the local economy.

Chinese PM leaves Nepal for Maldives

AFP, Kathmandu

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji left Nepal yesterday after a three-day official visit aimed at boosting trade and cooperation between the countries.

Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Koirala bade him a warm farewell as a Royal Nepal Army guard of honour gave a 19-gun salute.

Zhu had dinner with the Nepalese monarch King Birendra at the royal palace Tuesday evening.

During his visit, he held talks with Nepalese opposition leaders and the business community and visited Patan, an ancient township of art and artisans south of Kathmandu.

The countries also signed six agreements, including on the construction of a civil service hospital in Kathmandu, a polytechnic institute, and cooperation in science and technology and agriculture.

China also agreed to a 10-million-dollar economic and technical cooperation assistance grant for Nepal.

Zhu was the fourth Chinese prime minister to officially visit Nepal since diplomatic relations were established in 1955.

The Chinese premier, who arrived in Nepal from Pakistan Monday, left for the Maldives for the next leg of his five-nation tour, which includes Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Nepal receives about 10 million dollars each year from China in economic cooperation.

Pressure grows for greater US role in ME as conflict continues

AFP, Ramallah, West Bank

Pressure continued on the United States yesterday to take a more active role in the Middle East, as the conflict continued, with Israeli troops shelling in the Gaza Strip and raiding Palestinian-controlled territory there.

A Palestinian woman was seriously wounded and her little daughter slightly hurt when Israeli tanks shelled a refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip overnight, Palestinian medical and security sources said.

The Israeli forces also hit another home and a Palestinian security post, causing damage but no injuries, the sources added.

Israeli troops seized a dairy plant in Palestinian territory near a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip early Wednesday and staged a four-hour arms search of Palestinian homes, a senior security official said.

The plant is near a Jewish settlement Israel said had been hit earlier by a Palestinian mortar shell. Israel said mortars had also been fired at an Israeli kibbutz from the northern part of the Gaza Strip.

The latest incidents follow one of the deadliest days in the territories in weeks, when thousands of people protested across the Palestinian territories Tuesday for Al-Nakba, or the "catastrophe", recalling the hundreds of thousands who lost their homes when Israel was founded in 1948.

One Jewish settler was shot dead and four Palestinians killed, including a Hamas bodyguard firing mortars against Israeli territory, bringing the death toll from the uprising to 536. More 120 other Palestinians were injured in clashes that shook the occupied territories.

In Washington, Palestinian number two Mahmud Abbas met with US Secretary of State Colin Powell and national security advisor Condoleezza Rich to increase pressure on Washington to take a more active role in pushing for peace.

None of them spoke to reporters after the meeting, but State Department

spokesman Richard Boucher said the talks had been "good, long" and had covered all outstanding regional issues.

On Wednesday, the Palestine Liberation Organisation representative in Washington said Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will meet Powell in around 10 days, probably in Paris.

Hassan Abdel Rahman, who spoke on Voice of Palestine radio, also said that Abbas had urged the United States "to play a more active role in the peace process."

Pressure also came from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

In remarks published Wednesday, he said that the stability of the Middle East will be in danger if the United States fails to act to calm the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I'm still hoping for an American position that is more interested in what is going on in the region and more active in the peace process, because the situation is dangerous," Mubarak told Al-Musawwar magazine.

"Without active American intervention, the situation will deteriorate further, threatening the region's stability and security," Mubarak said in an interview with the weekly.

Mubarak complained that changes proposed by Israel to an Egyptian-Jordanian initiative to calm the situation were aimed at "suffocating and aborting" the drive launched last month to resume peace negotiations.

He said Bush's administration, which has failed to endorse the initiative, has "not yet informed us of the amendments they want."

The joint initiative, drawn up by the only two Arab countries to have made peace with Israel, calls for an end to the violence and a halt to all building of Jewish settlements by Israel on occupied Palestinian land.

It has garnered support from European countries and numerous other states as well as the Palestinians, but Israel has voiced objections.



An Injured Palestinian boy is carried away during clashes with Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Hebron on Tuesday. Israeli troops killed four Palestinians and wounded more than 120 others as clashes erupted throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as Palestinians marked Al-Nakba or "catastrophe," the term Palestinians use for the creation of the state of Israel 53 years ago which made hundreds of thousands of Palestinians homeless.

India to honour Southeast Asia N-free pact: Vajpayee

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Nuclear-armed India will honour a treaty declaring Southeast Asia a zone free of nuclear weapons, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said yesterday.

"We respect the status of Southeast Asia as a nuclear weapons-free zone and, as a nuclear weapon state, we are willing to convert this recognition into a de jure commitment," he said in a lecture, without elaborating.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar welcomed Vajpayee's support for the treaty signed by members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995.

He said he hoped India would ratify the pact soon.

"We welcome this kind of reaffirmation and the statement that they are in support of our nuclear-free zone," he told reporters.

Syed Hamid said China had also agreed to ratify the pact but with certain changes.



"With India and China (agreeing) it is very good for Southeast Asia." Almost two years ago, China announced it would become the first nuclear-armed state to accede to the treaty, which seeks to prevent the manufacture, testing or storage of nuclear weapons in the region.

Vajpayee, speaking on the last day of his visit to Malaysia, also said the world now has a "better understanding" of India's decision to conduct nuclear weapons tests in 1998.

He said India campaigned for decades after independence in 1947 for nuclear disarmament.

But he complained that the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) preserved the right of a few states to nuclear weapons while keeping the rest permanently disarmed.

The nuclear states, Vajpayee said, showed no intention of undertaking phased disarmament as provided for under the pact.

When non-nuclear states subscribed in 1995 to an extension of this "hopelessly flawed treaty," India "had to draw its own conclusions."

Vajpayee said India decided to conduct nuclear tests after evaluating the security situation "and to create for India the necessary strategic autonomy and space."

He said: "There is better understanding in the world today of our

decision to maintain a minimum credible nuclear deterrent."

India had declared a moratorium on underground tests, had a policy of no first use and had made a commitment never to use nuclear arms against non-nuclear states.

India carried out five nuclear tests on May 11 and 13, 1998, attracting worldwide condemnation and US sanctions. Pakistan followed suit the same month with its own tests.

Vajpayee said the security dialogue between India and ASEAN was of "utmost importance."

"Threats like religious extremism, drug trafficking, money laundering and terrorism have cast a dark shadow over our region," he said.

"India has been a victim of state-sponsored terrorism and cross-border terrorism seeking to redraw national boundaries," he added, in apparent reference to Pakistan's support for Kashmiri guerrillas.

British N-plant shut down after acid leak

AFP, London

A reactor at a British nuclear power plant has been shut down following an acid leak, officials said yesterday.

The reactor at Sizewell B, in Suffolk, eastern England, was closed Friday for maintenance after sensors in the main containment area picked up a leak of boric acid.

Officials at the site, the country's first pressurised water reactor power plant, decided to keep it closed to carry out work on metal seals.

The seals, which were replaced only 18 months ago, are thought to have been corroded by the acid, which is "largely benign" but which acts as a corrosive on metal, officials said.

"There is no cause for alarm," spokesman John McNamara said.

"It has all taken place within the containment area and nothing gets out of there."

A spokesman for the Health and Safety Executive said the leakage had been going on "for some time" but insisted there was no danger to anyone.

Russia supports Annan's bid for second UN term

AFP, Moscow

Russia expressed support yesterday for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's candidacy for re-election as the United Nations chief and underlined the UN's key role in solving world disputes.

"Russia highly rates Kofi Annan's personal contribution to strengthening the United Nations' role and authority in international affairs," Interfax quoted Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov as saying during talks here with Annan.

The support of Russia, which is one of five permanent UN Security Council members, boosts Annan's re-election prospects when his first term expires at the end of the year. His candidacy has also been backed by Washington and Paris.

"We think the United Nations must play an important role in preserving the strategic stability of the world," Ivanov said in televised remarks at the start of their closed-door meeting.

The negotiations are further expected to focus on the conflict in Afghanistan and threat of Islamic extremism in neighbouring former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Delhi reports 146 cases of cholera

AFP, New Delhi

One hundred and forty six cases of cholera have been reported across the Indian capital New Delhi, a report said Wednesday.

The early onset of summer coupled with high humidity have led to a high incidence of the disease, the Times of India said.

By May 15, 146 cases had been reported and it was possible the numbers would rise, the newspaper said.

"Poor sanitation, improper drainage and irregular water supply are the main causes that allow the vibrio cholerae bacteria to flourish," the daily said, quoting an unidentified New Delhi municipal official.

Some areas such as slums were more susceptible due to a high density of a migrant population, he said.

The authorities were planning to crack down on shops and vendors selling cut fruits on handcarts in insanitary conditions, he added.

Benazir will be put on trial: Musharraf

AFP, London

Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf told a British newspaper yesterday that former prime minister Benazir Bhutto would be locked up if she ever returned from exile.

He also refused to rule out the possibility of becoming his country's president, in an interview with the Guardian.

"She (Benazir) has not been acquitted at all. She is trying to create this misunderstanding that she has been acquitted. She is to be retried, absolutely," he told the paper.

Benazir has suggested that she would return from London after local elections in August.

She and her husband Asif Ali Zardari last month won an appeal against their 1999 corruption conviction and the Supreme Court has ordered a retrial.

Benazir went into self-exile shortly before her conviction while Zardari has been in prison since Benazir's government was dismissed in 1996.

Musharraf also did not rule out the possibility of becoming his country's president after general elections in 2002.

"If there is a role for me in achieving (the reform of Pakistan) I will have to take it on," he told the daily.

He said his intention as military leader was to build democracy anew.

"There has never been any true democracy in Pakistan," he added, saying that Pakistan's first elected prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto -- Benazir's father -- was the "biggest dictator" of all.

He defended his sweeping arrests of 4,000 pro-democracy demonstrators in the past two months, insisting they enjoyed little popular support.

"I will not allow anything to happen in Pakistan which disturbs us from our main aim of reviving the economy and bringing good governance."

He reiterated his opposition to US plans to build a missile defence shield, warning it would "lead to resumption of (the) nuclear and missile race."



Indonesian Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri bangs the gavel to mark the opening of an official meeting with Indonesian province leaders in Jakarta yesterday. Megawati is widely expected to take over the presidency from embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid after his likely impeachment.

Indonesian political leaders call for changes in govt

AFP, Jakarta

Senior Indonesian political leaders yesterday called for changes in the way the country is governed, piling further pressure on embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid.

Although they stopped short of saying they wanted rid of Wahid, already beset by resignation demands over allegations of corruption and incompetence, they failed to rule out his replacement.

"We'd like to change the government," Arifin Panigoro, the leader of the host Indonesian Democracy Party of Struggle (PDIP) told a press conference after members of 10 political factions ended their closed-door meeting at a hotel here.

Asked if that meant getting rid of Wahid, Panigoro replied: "You know that Indonesians are very influenced by the Javanese way, so we have to be careful how we answer ... That's the right words. We say we would like to have a more effective government -- it means that we would like to change the government."

Panigoro emphasised that parties had agreed that any moves to achieve a more effective government would stick strictly to constitutional process, but gave no specifics.

Indonesia has been in political turmoil since February when the lower house first censured Wahid over his alleged involvement in two financial scandals.

In April the house censured him a second time, paving the way for possible impeachment. Wahid

protested his innocence, and vowed to serve out his term until 2004.

The four-hour crisis meeting, whose participants included the military and the parliament leaders of Wahid's own National Awakening Party, told the press conference that they had decided on four main points.

The first was the need for a more effective government, the second to stop the country from going bankrupt and the third to avoid the disintegration of the nation and to increase supremacy of the law.

"We agreed we need to increase the effectiveness of the government," said Alvin Lie, a normally outspoken representative of the parliament's Reform Faction, which is at the forefront of moves to oust Wahid.

Other faction leaders also used the term "more effective" government, rather than a change of government.

When asked how they would increase the government's effectiveness, Lie replied: "We leave it to our party chiefs to decide how."

The faction leaders described the closed-door meeting as "informal" and said it was a precursor to a higher-level party leaders' meeting soon.

Prior to the meeting Panigoro had said the question of the possible impeachment of Wahid would not be the focus of the meeting because they had already agreed on calling the session of the upper house with impeachment powers.

Workers start removing the iron rings circling the leaning tower of Pisa on Tuesday. Some 50,000 cubic metres of earth was dug out from the sides of the tower away from the tilt. Besides the rings, some 800 tons of counter weights made of lead and two gantries gripping the tower on both sides were removed. The tower will be reopened to the public in November after eleven years' of restoration work making it safe from collapse. Visitors will help defray some of the costs by paying an admission charge of 25,000 lire (\$ 12). Before the monument was closed in 1990, the entrance was free. Before the efforts to reverse the lean, the eight-storey tower - some 54.5 metres high - was adding an average of 1mm a year to its 4.5 metres lean from the perpendicular. The construction of the tower was started in 1174 but was only completed in 1350, when its tilt was already about half of what it is today.

PHOTO: AFP

New US administration makes for uncertain security in Asia: IISS

AFP, London

Asia confronts a security environment rendered more uncertain by the change in the US administration, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said in its annual report yesterday.

"After eight years of a Clinton administration that embraced China as a 'strategic partner', Beijing faces increased tension with a new administration that considers it a strategic competitor and that is more disposed to arm Taiwan," it said.

And Japan "has hard choices to make about whether to complement the United States' more aggressive strategic posture by expanding its own regional security role."

On the Korean peninsula, the Bush administration has "cramped South Korea's diplomatic style": while former president Bill Clinton backed Seoul's attempt to engage Pyongyang, President George W. Bush is deeply sceptical.

The one area where the Bush team has made little impact is South Asia.

In Southeast Asia, IISS said, disruptive stimuli have tended to be homegrown.

Indonesia faces several separatist movements and President Abdurrahman Wahid continues to be an "erratic and inept leader" who could be forced from office.

In the Philippines, Joseph

Estrada was driven out as popular anger erupted over corruption and misrule that has left a debt-ridden economy in decline.

Border tensions between Thailand and Myanmar have grown, with Myanmar indulging in drug trafficking and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has turned increasingly ineffectual, IISS said.

On the economic front, the benefits of China's impending World Trade Organisation membership "are likely to be countered by unfamiliar competitive pressure that will produce an element of domestic instability and make continued high growth critical."

Japan's economy has shown little sign of breaking out of its decade-long slump.

"Pakistan and Indonesia remain economic basket-cases in need of help from the International Monetary Fund, help that the fund often finds difficult to offer because of the conduct of their regimes," IISS said.

Amid the domestic and regional tumult in Asia, IISS said, "the clearest positive chord in 2000 was North Korea's apparent interest in diplomatic engagement."

But, it warned, Pyongyang supremo Kim Jong-Il "remains an unpredictable and equivocal interlocutor."