

'US may back away from germ warfare treaty'

AFP, Washington

Washington may be backing away from endorsing an international treaty that would ban germ warfare, after a confidential White House report panned the draft accord, the New York Times reported Sunday.

Citing senior US officials, the newspaper reported that an inter-agency team concluded that the protocol would be inefficient in imposing measures to monitor the banned biological weapons.

"The review says that the protocol would not be of much value in catching potential proliferators," a senior American official told the Times.

The recommendations appear certain to distress US allies, who fear the White House is focusing too much on new military programs and not enough on treaties and non-proliferation.

A 1972 treaty, which 143 nations have ratified, prohibits the development, production and possession of biological weapons. The United States' support for the protocol is considered essential for its international credibility.

30 killed in bus explosion in Somalia

Reuters, Mogadishu

Up to 30 Somali bus passengers were killed on Saturday when a bag of gunpowder carried by one traveller exploded, engulfing the vehicle in a ball of flame, radio reports said.

Fire swept through the bus when the explosion ignited barrels of fuel and a petrol engine stowed on board, while some witnesses said the bus was also carrying landmines.

The driver leapt to safety through his window, but many passengers were trapped in the inferno as the doors and windows were locked, according to the reports.

Six people riding on top of the vehicle managed to dive clear when the bus exploded near the village of Halgan, 250km north of the capital Mogadishu.

Relatives gathered to identify their dead at Halgan, which lies between the town of Bulo Burti and the regional capital Belet Uen where the bus was headed.

Estrada to get special home in hospital compound

AFP, Manila

The Philippines government will build a special annex at a northern Manila hospital to house depressed ousted leader Joseph Estrada, who is undergoing medical check-ups, President Gloria Arroyo said yesterday.

Arroyo's announcement came a day after she paid a surprise visit to Estrada at the hospital, where he and his son, Jose Ejercito, were transferred last week.

Estrada and Ejercito have been detained since last month to stand trial on charges of economic plunder beginning in June.

They were first kept at a northern Manila jail but later transferred to a police camp south of the capital when thousands of his supporters stormed the presidential palace on May 1.

Both were airlifted to the hospital last week for medical evaluation ahead of crucial congressional and local elections.

2 British women jailed for life in Emirates for drug trafficking

AFP, Ras Al-Khaimah, UAE

An Islamic court yesterday jailed two British women for life for drug trafficking and sentenced a Londoner to spend 10 years in prison in this conservative emirate.

Anna Bartlett, 24, from Essex, and Anne Kidd, 32, of Leeds, wearing black headscarves and traditional long black robes were also each ordered to pay a 50,000-dirham fine (13,600 USD) by the court in Ras Al-Khaimah, part of the United Arab Emirates.

Life usually means 25 years in the emirate where they were tried under Islamic Sharia law.

Bartlett was caught passing two cocaine capsules to Kidd during their time in custody, the court heard. Both denied trafficking charges.

Daniel Maalouf, 28, a Londoner with a Lebanese father, received 10 years in jail for possession, use and intent to distribute drugs.

Lawyers said they would appeal the verdicts and have 15 days to do so.

Chemical pollution: Stockholm Convention set to ban 'Dirty Dozen'

AFP, Stockholm

A dozen notoriously toxic chemicals will be outlawed or restricted around the world under a landmark UN treaty set to be signed here this week.

In a rare piece of good news about the global environment, the accord will ban, phase out or severely cut back a range of industrial chemicals and pesticides that linger in soil and water for decades.

These pollutants pass up the food chain and accumulate in the body's fatty tissues, becoming a suspected source of allergies, birth defects, cancer and damage to the immune system and reproductive organs.

The treaty, which will be known as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), was finalised in Johannesburg last December after a marathon lasting two and a half years.

"This is a historic achievement," UN Environment Programme (UNEP) spokesman Michael Williams told AFP by phone from Geneva. "We have the chance of getting rid of some of the most toxic substances ever made by Man."

"Every person in the entire world carries traces of POPs," said Swedish environment ministry spokeswoman Anette Toernqvist. "This is the first step taken on an international level. Until now, all efforts have been conducted on a national or EU level." The dozen toxic chemicals comprise eight pesticides (aldrin, chlordane, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, mirex and toxaphene); two industrial compounds (polychlorinated biphenols (PCBs) and hexachlorobenzene, which is also a

pesticide); and two by-products of combustion and industrial processes (dioxins and furans).

These chemicals are alarming not just because they resist biodegradation and are toxic -- they are also highly mobile, able to circulate around the world in what is called the "grass-hopper effect".

Under this, POPs can be picked up in water evaporation, taken along by wind, deposited on the land or in the sea and then picked up again and deposited again, to places far from the original source.

As a result, they can end up in the tissues of people living thousands of kilometres from any major POP source, such as the Arctic, where POP concentrations among native Inuits are high because their staple diet includes fatty seal meat.

The Convention will immediately ban most of the "Dirty Dozen" although an exemption on health grounds has been granted to DDT, which is still needed by poor tropical countries to combat malarial mosquitoes.

Countries will be able to retain DDT until they find alternatives that are cheap and environmentally friendly.

PCBs, which were widely used as an insulative fluid in electrical transformers, will likewise get a reprieve because of the high cost, in many countries, of replacing the equipment.

PCBs are no longer produced, but "hundreds of thousands of tonnes" are still in use, UNEP says. Governments will have until 2025 to phase them out, but must maintain existing equipment in a way that prevents leaks. In addition, some countries have been given specific delays for phasing out other chemicals.

The Convention sets up control mechanisms to cover the production, import, export, disposal and use of POPs, and makes money available to developing countries to wean them off these chemicals, and opens the possibility of adding other POPs to the list.

Environment groups say they are happy with the arrangement.

"To lay down a benchmark that has elimination as a goal is a real step forward for the international community," Clifton Curtis, director of the Global Toxics Initiative at the WWF, said here Friday.

The ceremonies start on Tuesday with a gathering of environment ministers or senior officials from 123 countries, followed by formal signature of the Convention on Wednesday.

The treaty will become legally binding once it has been ratified by 50 countries, a process likely to take several years.

Canadian Environment Minister David Anderson will submit Canada's instruments of ratification as he signs the treaty, a possibly unique event in diplomacy that has been made possible by an exceptional decision of parliament in Ottawa.

The Bush administration -- facing a storm of international criticism for its environment policy, especially its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming -- declared on April 19 that it would stand by the Clinton government's signature of the POP accord.

Samata Party threatens to quit BJP-led coalition

AFP, New Delhi

A key ally of India's ruling BJP-led coalition, the Samata Party, said yesterday it would stay in the government only if the BJP supported it in a state vote in the northeastern state of Manipur.

Shambhu Srivastava of the Samata Party said they were waiting to see the fate of their two-month-old coalition government in Manipur where Chief Minister Radhabinod Kojima was seeking a vote of confidence.

"If the BJP votes against our government in the Manipur state legislature, then the most likely decision on Monday will be to quit the government," said Srivastava.

The Samata Party has 13 lawmakers in the 60-member Manipur legislature and has been supported by 26 BJP lawmakers.

Srivastava said political divisions in the state which saw the BJP increase its strength from eight to 26 lawmakers had led Kojima to seek a vote of confidence to "clear the air and build trust."

"The BJP first assured us that they would support us in the vote. But later they refused to order their members to vote for Kojima and that triggered the crisis in Manipur," Srivastava added.

The Samata Party has 12 MPs in the national parliament and its withdrawal of support would deal a blow to the coalition, already weakened by the withdrawal of the regional Trinamool Congress which has nine MPs.

The ruling BJP-led coalition has 292 members of parliament, just 19 more than the majority needed to rule.

Samata Party leader George Fernandes resigned as defence minister in March following an arms bribery scandal which rocked the Indian government.

Meanwhile, the BJP held a meeting with its allies Sunday to draw up a battle plan to offset its performance in state polls earlier this month where it lost substantial ground to the main opposition Congress party.

Arab govts urged to sever all contacts with Israel

AP, Cairo

Arab governments must sever all contacts with Israel until the Jewish state ceases military action against Palestinians, representatives of Arab countries demanded Saturday, throwing into doubt whether Egypt and Jordan would continue efforts to mediate an Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire.

A meeting of Arab foreign ministers and delegates made the recommendation. Arab league calls are not binding on governments, but the foreign ministers and other senior officials to attend Saturday's meeting were believed to have been in contact with the highest levels of their governments during the eight-hour gathering.

"The meeting called for severing all Arab political communication with Israel as long as the aggression of the siege on the Palestinian people and their national authority continues," according to a statement issued at the end of the emergency meeting.

Israeli political reaction to the decision was swift.

A spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Saturday said the Arab League decision was self-defeating by not urging Yasser Arafat to stop the violence, but giving the Palestinian leader a "prize" for his actions.

"This is not a decision, it's propaganda," Raanan Gissin said. "They (the Arabs) need peace exactly as much as we do. Who will they talk to? Each other?". "He added that the league decision "will turn around like a boomerang and work against them."

Lending weight to the call to sever end Israeli contacts were Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa, who spent years mediating with the Israelis and Palestinians as Egypt's foreign minister, and

Jordanian Foreign Minister Abdullah Khatib.

Jordan and Egypt are the only Arab countries to have signed peace agreements with Israel. Both also have been pushing hard for a diplomatic resolution to the latest violence, which has left more than 500 dead since Sept. 28.

"Our intention is not to talk about or fall in the trap of talking about peace proposals while we see that the Israeli government does not really mean it," Moussa said. "The attacks against the Palestinians will have to stop, otherwise we will be acting under the point of the gun which we totally and utterly reject."

Khatib did not answer directly when asked whether Jordan's diplomatic efforts would now end, instead saying, the move "reflects the uselessness of political contacts that do not succeed in stopping the violence and lifting the siege on the Palestinian people."

There was no immediate comment from the Egyptian foreign ministry.

On his return to Gaza late Saturday, Arafat told reporters the league position "reflects the Arab solidarity and stand" with the Palestinians following Israeli F-16 warplane and Apache helicopter attacks in Gaza and the West Bank.

The Arab League statement criticised the Israeli government for its reluctance to accept cease-fire proposals including an Egyptian-Jordanian initiative.

Like the Egyptian-Jordanian proposal, the committee called on Israel to freeze settlement construction. Sharon has been an advocate for Jewish settlers, resisting efforts to halt construction.

China cautions India over backing US missile defence

AFP, New Delhi

China urged India to exercise extreme caution in backing the planned US National Missile Defence (NMD) system, the Statesman newspaper reported Sunday.

The paper quoted Zhou Gang, the Chinese ambassador to New Delhi, as saying that India might have ignored certain realities in responding positively to the controversial project without analysing it.

"Peace loving countries and people should have an understanding of the NMD's dangers. We oppose it because it promotes strategic imbalances ... and domination of world politics," Zhou said.

However, the Chinese ambassador said India's positive response to

the NMD system "would not come in the way" of improving bilateral ties between India and China.

New Delhi's official stance on the project, designed to protect the US from missile attacks by what Washington considers "rogue states", has been difficult to read.

The Indian government first gave the impression of endorsing the idea within hours of US President George W. 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 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.

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

China is also opposed to NMD which it sees as a potential threat to its own nuclear missile deterrent.

Beijing also fears a regional version of the system could neutralise its missile threat against Taiwan, which it considers a renegade province that must return to its rule, by force if necessary.

"It is good for them (India, China and Russia) to cooperate in international affairs for the benefit of world peace," said Zhou.



PHOTO: AFP

Mongolia's Revolutionary Party presidential candidate Natsagyn Bagabandi casts his vote on Sunday in Ulan Bator during the country's presidential elections. Like the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, Bagabandi has promised everything to all with little chance of delivering to those in greatest need due to the country's desperate financial and environmental problems.

Mongolians go to polls

AP, Ulan Bator

By horse and jeep, Mongolians went to the polls yesterday in a presidential election that could seal a return to power for the former communist leaders of this vast, sparsely populated country.

Nomadic herders cast ballots in tents set up across the Mongolian steppe and the Gobi Desert in a contest between President Natsagiin Bagabandi, a former communist official, and two liberal challengers. On a crisp, clear spring day, many voters arrived at polling stations dressed in their best traditional flowing silk robes.

Bagabandi's Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, which ran the country as a Soviet ally for seven decades but now espouses radical reform, won 72 of 76 seats in parliament last year. The party says re-electing Bagabandi as president will guarantee stability and give it the power to revive the economy and reverse a decline in living standards in the country of 2.4 million people.

Bagabandi supporters said they weren't worried about the prospect of turning Mongolia into a virtual one-party state. The president's party already controls all 21 of the country's provincial governorships.

"The MPRP has great and rich experience after running the country for 70 years. I consider Bagabandi to have led the country well," said Tsamba Basanjav, a 68-year-old retired teacher who was voting at a high school in the capital, Ulan Bator.

Monument of Stalin may be restored

AFP, Moscow

A monument to late Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, whose brutal purges killed millions, may be restored in the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Sevastopol, the head of the city council said.

Restoring the monument would do historical justice to the man who had done a lot for the city of Sevastopol, Vasyl Parkhomenko was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency.

"I cannot ignore the 7,500 signatures on a proposal which calls on the city council to restore the monument," Vasyl Parkhomenko said Saturday.

When the city council considers the issue, it find a solution that would suit "an absolute majority of Sevastopol's residents," Parkhomenko added.

Last December a statue of the Soviet-era dictator, born Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili in 1878, was unveiled in his hometown Gori in Georgia.

Syrian PM to visit Baghdad today

AFP, Baghdad

Mohammad Mustapha Miro will on Monday become the first Syrian prime minister to visit Baghdad for 20 years, an Iraqi official said yesterday, in a new sign of reconciliation between the two neighbours.

The news came a day after Damascus opened an interests section in Baghdad and follows a visit to Syria in January by Iraqi Vice-President Taha Yassine Ramadan.

The official, who refused to be named, told AFP that Miro's talks were "particularly important" and would embrace "the strengthening of relations between the two countries in all fields."

The two Arab states, which are ruled by rival branches of the Baath party, broke off relations in 1980 when Damascus backed Tehran in the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq.

The first real improvement took until 1997 when Syria and Iraq reopened their border for businessmen and officials.

Iraq, which has been under a UN trade embargo since invading Kuwait in 1990, signed a free trade accord with Syria in January during Ramadan's visit.



PHOTO: AFP

Commander of the Kostrad strategic reserve command, Lt. General Ryamizard Ryacudu (L), shakes hands with Army Deputy Chief of Staff, Lt. General Kiki Syahnakri (R), shortly after an "oath of loyalty" ceremony at Kostrad headquarters in Jakarta on Sunday. Over 800 members of the Indonesian elite army unit, Kostrad, held a roll call pledging loyalty to the state.