

Vajpayee retains key security advisor

AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee decided yesterday not to remove National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra from his office, ignoring pressure from hardline right-wing Hindu nationalists.

The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which is the parent organisation of Vajpayee's BJP party, has accused Mishra, who is also the prime minister's principal secretary, of making "adverse" economic and security decisions and demanded he be removed.

But Defence Minister Jaswant Singh ruled it out.

"The National Security Council is still in a formative stage. The prime minister is in charge of NSC and it is best at this stage that the principal secretary continues as the national security advisor," Singh said at a press conference here.

He added that whenever the NSC becomes fully functional, Mishra's responsibility as security advisor will be given to the new NSC chief.

In recent days, rumours circulating in western diplomatic circles in the Indian capital suggested that Mishra may be offered the job of India's ambassador in Paris.

The last few months have seen mounting pressure on Vajpayee from the RSS which has been attacking the liberals in his government for following "pro-West, anti-workers" economic reforms and "detrimental" security-related policies.

Former Pak naval chief faces corruption trial

AFP, Islamabad

Former Pakistani Naval chief Admiral Mansur ul Haq was being extradited from the United States late Wednesday to stand trial on charges of corruption in defence deals, officials said.

A special team sent by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the military regime's watchdog on corruption, was to escort the retired admiral from the US, where he has been living since his dismissal in 1997, NAB spokesman Attique Rehman said.

Haq is accused of receiving millions of dollars in kickbacks on defence deals during his tenure as Navy chief from 1994 to 1997, Rehman said.

He was arrested in the US last month on Pakistan's request and a US court later allowed his extradition.

Haq was sacked in mid-1997 by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was deposed in an October 1999 coup by General Pervez Musharraf.

The NAB spokesman said Haq was allegedly involved in cases of corruption and kickbacks amounting to 3.36 million dollars in the purchase of defence equipment and French submarines for the Pakistani navy.

The anti-corruption bureau revived the charges against Haq amid criticism the regime was not extending the accountability process to the top levels of the armed forces.

The extradition of such a senior Pakistani official is the first by the US since the military government launched a tough anti-corruption drive, Rehman said.

The authorities here have said the US and Britain have not done enough to extradite fugitives, including former politicians and top bureaucrats wanted for corruption.

British opposition closes gap on Labour: Poll

AFP, London

The lead enjoyed by Britain's ruling Labour Party over the opposition Conservative Party has narrowed but remains formidable, according to an opinion poll published yesterday.

An ICM poll in the Guardian newspaper put Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour on 45 percent of the vote, 13 points ahead of the Conservatives who have the backing of 32 percent of voters.

On that reckoning, Labour's lead has shrunk by two points since the last Guardian/ICM poll on May 14.

It is the first time a poll has shown the Conservatives making up ground since the start of the election campaign two weeks ago.

However, Conservative leader William Hague will not be breaking out the champagne as analysts cautioned that ICM polls usually show a slimmer lead for the government than rival surveys.

Most recent opinion polls have put the gap between Labour and the Conservatives at between 15 and 20 percent, leaving Blair almost assured of victory on June 7.

The ICM poll also showed that Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott had benefited from the punch he landed on the chin of an egg-throwing protester last week.

His personal popularity rating has improved by 11 points, though the number who dislike him still outnumber his fans.

Sharon calls for ceasefire but refuses to freeze settlement activities

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has called for a ceasefire and promised to tone down its military campaign against the Palestinians, but bellicose Arab rhetoric and fighting on the ground show that peace remains a distant goal.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Tuesday backed a call in the US-sponsored Mitchell report for an end to eight months of Middle East violence but refused to halt building in Jewish settlements, a position Palestinians said would doom the latest peace moves.

The Israeli defence ministry later announced that it had instructed soldiers "to open fire only in cases of life-threatening danger," although it was not immediately clear whether the order was affecting the situation on the ground.

Sharon urged the Palestinians -- and also Israel's Arab neighbours Syria and Lebanon -- "to stop the violence immediately and return to the negotiating table".

"If the Palestinians accept the proposals for an immediate ceasefire we shall," Sharon told a Jerusalem news conference.

In Washington, US President George W. Bush was "encouraged" by Sharon's remarks, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

Bush "welcomes the statement by Prime Minister Sharon. It is vital in order to... bring the parties together and to secure a peace in the Middle East," Fleischer said.

However, the violence continued with gunfights reported late Tuesday near Jerusalem after a day in which Israel made five armed incursions into Palestinian territory, a practice Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer

said would now need to prior approval by political authorities.

Israel has made at least 17 incursions into Palestinian-ruled areas over the past 10 days, in violation of the 1993 agreement on Palestinian autonomy. Palestinians also fired four mortar bombs on Israeli territory near the Gaza Strip and on a Jewish settlement, according to the army.

Separately, a member of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Force 17 guard died of injuries sustained in a West Bank gunfight Friday, bringing to 562 the number of people killed since late September, a huge majority of them Palestinians.

The war of words also continued, with Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah pledging that the militant Lebanese Shiite movement would fight alongside the Palestinians until Israel is defeated, one year after the Jewish state withdrew from Lebanon.

"We are with you, in the same fight, whether the Shebaa Farms are under occupation or not," Nasrallah said, alluding to a disputed area where the militant group often ambushes Israeli forces.

Nasrallah said Hezbollah's "members, leaders, activists and means are at the service" of Palestinian groups that preach jihad, or Islamic holy war, against the Jewish state.

Nabil Abu Rudeina, a top advisor to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat described the Mitchell report, which was published Monday, "as a beginning to end the crisis," while adding that the report, combined with the Sharm el-Sheikh understanding of October and a Egyptian-Jordanian peace initiative, provided an "answer for all the issues."

China lodges formal protest over Chen's visit to US

AFP, Beijing

China on Wednesday summoned the United States' senior diplomat in Beijing to protest over Washington's decision to allow Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian to stop over in the United States en route to Latin America.

Assistant Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong lodged a "solemn representation with the US government for its permission of Chen Shui-bian's stopover to the United States," the Xinhua news agency said.

The protest was lodged with charge d' affaires Michael W. Marine, the official news agency said. Marine is currently acting head of the US embassy in Beijing pending the arrival of a new ambassador.

Zhou said "the wrongdoing of the US government seriously dishonoured the three Sino-US joint communiques and the commitments made by the US side, stirred the arrogance of the splittist force who sought Taiwan's 'independence', and grossly interfered in

China's internal affairs".

"The Chinese side expresses its strong indignation at and firm opposition" to such moves, Xinhua quoted the deputy foreign minister assaying.

Chen, from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, arrived in New York on Monday for a two-night stopover ahead of a Latin American tour.

China had demanded the administration of President George W. Bush refuse him entry.

Beijing insists Taiwan, which split from the mainland after the country's civil war in 1949, is part of its territory and opposes any activity on the international stage that raises the island's international profile.

It has reserved particular invective for Chen, who swept to power last year after 51 years of rule by the nationalist Kuomintang.

On Wednesday Chen held a 30-minute breakfast meeting with New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, an old friend.

Chen, the first Taiwan president to set foot in New York in half a



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli left-wing activists from the Peace Now group (L) argue with settlers in the northern West Bank Jewish settlement of Yakir on Tuesday during a demonstration against the construction of settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Landmine blast kills 15 in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas blew up a navy bus in northeastern Sri Lanka yesterday, killing at least 15 people and wounding more than a dozen others, officials here said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas ambushed the bus by exploding a landmine as it passed the village of Thampalagamam in the port district of Trincomalee, officials said.

Military sources said 15 people were killed, but the defence ministry spokesman here, Sanath Karunaratne said he could confirm 10 deaths and that 17 others were wounded.

Out of those who escaped with injuries, eight were in a critical condition, Karunaratne said.

The ministry said it was not immediately clear if all the victims were security personnel as family members of sailors were also known to travel in the same bus operating from Trincomalee.

"The bus overturned after the blast," a defence official here said.

Rescue teams were working on removing from the wreckage the bodies of the victims.

Reinforcements were rushed to the area, officials said, adding they suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas were responsible for the attack. There was no immediate reaction from the rebels.

The mine attack came despite a routine search of the highway every morning before allowing traffic.

However, military sources said the landmine may have gone undetected because of repair work on the road at the time.

Usually, troopers armed with pitch forks walk along either side of the road at dawn looking for wires leading into a shrub jungle from where Tiger rebels manually trigger the explosives against vehicles.

Troops also look for freshly dug earth to see if mines have been planted by the rebels who infiltrate the highway at night when the military is unable to maintain total control over it.

Tree-planting no defence against global warming: Studies

AFP, Paris

Sceptics who say global warming can be offset by planting trees have been dealt a blow by new scientific evidence which suggests forests are of very limited use in tackling the problem.

American conservatives, especially the powerful US oil and coal lobby, say global warming has been overblown as a danger.

They argue that rising levels of carbon dioxide (CO2) -- the by-product of fossil fuels blamed for causing atmospheric warming -- can be cut by planting forest "sinks" rather than by enforcing unpopular fuel taxes or efficiency rules.

Trees thrive on atmospheric CO2, sucking it up as part of the process of photosynthesis. So the extra CO2 will cause trees to put on a huge spurt of growth, their trunks and branches storing up most of the added airborne carbon, according to this argument.

But two studies published Thursday in the British science weekly Nature condemn these hopes as unfounded -- and the findings could resound at negotiations to complete the Kyoto Protocol, the UN's global-warming treaty.

The research was based on a remarkable, long-running experiment run by Duke University, North Carolina.

Eager to find out, in real life rather than laboratory conditions, how higher CO2 could affect trees, the university's environment scientists in 1993 ringed off a 30-metre (100-feet) patch of forest land where a typical North American pine, the loblolly, grows.

They then erected a system of pipes around this patch which discharged air enriched with CO2, simulating the possible state of the Earth's atmosphere in 2100.

The result: the CO2-doped pines shot up -- to start with. For the first three

years, their growth was 34 percent more than normal pines in the adjoining area. But growth then plunged over the next four years, to just six percent more per year than the other pines.

The reason for this is clear, say the authors, led by Duke University's Ram Oren.

Even though the pines had more CO2 their growth was limited by the nitrogen nutrients in the soil. When the team added nitrogen fertiliser to half of the CO2-enriched plot, trees in that area started to flourish just as before.

"Estimates of increases in carbon sequestration of forests, which is expected to partially compensate for increasing CO2 in the atmosphere, are unduly optimistic," they warn.

In another study, based on the same experimental site, researchers looked at another key factor -- how long a forest can store carbon before it is released back into the atmosphere when the vegetation dies and rots.

In a CO2-rich environment, the total amount of dead leaves and branches on the forest floor increases, but so does the rate at which they break down.

Once a leaf falls from the tree, its carbon is back in the atmosphere just three years or so later, according to Duke University's William Schlesinger and John Lichter of Bowden College, Maine.

Put together, the conclusions are: forests appear to work for only a limited time in absorbing airborne CO2 -- and they have to be planted in fertile areas to be really effective.

Talks aimed at wrapping up the Kyoto Protocol last November foundered largely on a bitter squabble on the "sink" issue.

The United States demanded that its huge forests be considered a CO2-guzzling sponge that should ease its need to cut emissions of greenhouse gases, as scheduled under the treaty.

Sun may have more than 9 planets: Astronomers

AFP, Paris

A large asteroid, named Varuna after the lord of the cosmos in Hindu mythology, has been spotted in the outer fringes of the Solar System, a discovery which suggests the Sun may have more than nine planets, astronomers say.

Varuna was detected last November by Arizona-based astronomers in the Spacewatch Project, a scheme aimed at scouring the asteroid belts to look, in part, for rogue rocks that could be a potential threat to Earth.

The spherical object is 900 kms in diameter, which makes it only a tad smaller than Charon, the tiny moon (1,200 kms, 750 miles, across) that orbits Pluto, the most distant of the Sun's nine known planets.

The discovery, by a team led by David Jewitt of the Institute of Astronomy in Honolulu, is reported Thursday in Nature, the British science weekly.

Until 1992, Pluto and Charon were the only known objects in the Kuiper Belt, an ancient ring of icy bodies believed to have been formed from the outer reaches of material that swirled around the infant Sun billions of years ago.

Since then, more than 400 other Kuiper Belt objects have been discovered by powerful telescopes.

But astronomers suspect the belt could hold hundreds of thousands of rocks 100 kms across, and possibly billions of others 10 kms across.

The biggest handicap to identifying them has been the poor reflectivity of these objects.

They are so far from the Sun that solar rays are terribly weak, and many of the objects themselves are dark, which means that they reflect very little light to enable astronomers to identify and measure them.

In Varuna's case, the asteroid was easy to spot because it shone brightly, thanks to its reflective surface.

In a commentary, US-based astronomers Stephen Tegler and William Romanishin said they were excited by the discovery of Varuna.

It could vindicate the US astronomer Clyde Tombaugh, who in 1930 found "Planet X," the long-suspected ninth planet of the Solar System, and named it Pluto, but continued his search of Kuiper Belt in the belief that other planets were still to be discovered, they said.

"Their work raises the possibility that Pluto is not the only Planet X, but perhaps one of several," said Tegler and Romanishin.

"(...) We can now imagine that bodies even larger and more distant than Pluto will be found."

Wahid has 'no plan to replace' top army officers

AFP, Jakarta

Embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid Wednesday held unscheduled talks with the top brass of the Indonesian armed forces to reassure them he had no plans to replace them.

Armed forces (TNI) chief Admiral Widodo Adisucipto as well as the heads of the army, the navy and airforce attended the meeting in the presidential palace along with Attorney General Marzuki Darusman and top security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. "I, together with the TNI commander and the heads of staffs and the head of the national intelligence agency were summoned by the president," Yudhoyono told journalists after the meeting.

Wahid, who is battling for his political life against a hostile parliament, again clarified that he had no intention of replacing any top military officers, he said.

"The president conveyed that there is no plan to replace the leadership of the TNI, especially the army and navy chiefs," Yudhoyono said.

He said the meeting was a response to rumours and press reports that the president was planning to replace the two.

The reports, he said "can cause

unrest within the military and can heat up the political situation."

"I hope the president's statement can become a reference in dealing with the various rumours that have developed," Yudhoyono added.

The meeting came a day after the armed forces chief said he had personally checked with Wahid on rumours about the armed forces.

It also came a week before parliament is due to meet to consider calling a special session of the national assembly that could impeach Wahid.

Strong rumors have said Wahid - under fire from the military for reportedly exploring the possibility of dissolving parliament by decree -- was planning to change army chief General Endriartono Sutarto with a loyalist general.

Shortly before Wednesday's meeting, Wahid reiterated he had never intended to replace Sutarto, who has been openly critical of the decree scheme.

"There is no such thing, it is only a distorted (report)," Wahid told journalists.

Analysts have viewed the spate of statements by generals over the issue of the replacement and the use of the decree to dissolve the parliament as a sign that the president had alienated himself from the military.

Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, a key element in Wahid's political survival, has also denied that differences of opinion between her and Wahid had caused a rift in their relations.

Megawati described her personal relations with Wahid as "good."

"We have never behaved the way people in dispute treat each other. Other people may refuse to speak to each other if they have a difference of opinion, but we have not done that at all," Megawati said in an interview with the state Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI), the Jakarta Post daily reported.

Megawati, who chairs the country's largest political party, the Indonesian Democracy Party for Struggle (PDIP) which won the 1999 general elections, is as vice president first in line to replace Wahid should he resign or be incapacitated during his term.

As if to reinforce her claim, Megawati on Wednesday held her regular weekly breakfast with Wahid at her residence.

Wahid is currently battling efforts by the parliament to impeach him for gross incompetence in ruling Indonesia, failing to lead the country out of economic crisis or halt communal unrest.



PHOTO: AFP

A policeman fires a teargas shell at demonstrators, protesting the detention of Kashmiri separatist leader Sheikh Abdul Aziz, in main commercial hub of Srinagar yesterday. The protesters clashed with the police at a number of places in the city following Aziz's arrest at the Srinagar Airport after his return from a month-long tour of Pakistan.