

US Senate votes to lift sanctions on Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The US Senate late Thursday voted to lift practically all remaining sanctions against Pakistan in yet another move to untie the president's hands in forging an effective coalition against terrorism.

By unanimous consent, Senators approved a bill that authorises President George W. Bush to sell weapons, dual-use items and provide financial assistance to Pakistan and India that he deems important to deter and prevent acts of international terrorism, in the wake of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

A similar measure is pending action in the House of Representatives. While the bill formally gives equal treatment to the old South Asian rivals, it is primarily applicable to Pakistan because most sanctions against India have already been waived.

"Today the Senate took a major step closer to helping solidify our international coalition against terrorism," Republican Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, the bill's primary sponsor, said in a statement.

"This represents significant progress on an issue that is so important to freeing the administration's hand in working with Pakistan -- a nation that is pivotal in the coming war," he stressed.

Citing US national security interests, Bush announced last month his decision to waive sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan after their successive series of nuclear weapons tests in 1998.

But Pakistan also has to cope with another set of sanctions, imposed by the US Congress in the aftermath of a bloodless 1999 military coup that

brought General Pervez Musharraf, the country's current president, to power.

These measures barred the US government from providing Pakistan more than 50 million dollars in foreign aid a year, ruled out debt rescheduling for the country as well as US balance of payment support, according to congressional officials.

What's more, unlike previous bills, they did not give the president the authority to invoke US national interests in order to waive the sanctions, the officials said.

"This bill lifts those restrictions and authorizes the president to offer assistance to Pakistan and India in order to respond to, deter and prevent acts of international terrorism," Brownback said.

However, the measure continues to bar any nuclear cooperation between the United States and the two countries.

Following last month's attacks leaving some 5,500 people dead or missing, Pakistan has agreed to allow the US military to use its airspace and military facilities in possible anti-terrorist operations in Afghan territory.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden said earlier Thursday that this stance adopted by Islamabad needed to be rewarded.

"Pakistan has chosen to stand with the United States," Biden said. "We need to assist this important front-line state."

For his part, Biden has proposed a one-billion-dollar recovery package for Central Asia that calls for creation of secular schools and protection of women's rights.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Afghan refugee children stand in front of wheat bags donated by the US for starving and displaced Afghans and distributed by the World Food Programme on the outskirts of Pakistan's southwestern city of Quetta on Friday. Tons of wheat, oil and other food items are being transported to Afghanistan under WFO by trucks through the Pakistan-Afghan border, Chaman, some 150 km from Quetta.

Aid groups call for new focus in Afghan relief efforts

AFP, Islamabad

Aid agencies voiced concern Friday that relief efforts for Afghanistan were being misdirected and urged a "non-political" humanitarian action of "massive" proportions to focus on people inside the country.

A statement signed by 18 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including CARE International, Oxfam and Save the Children, said the best response to a potential refugee crisis was to prevent Afghans becoming refugees in the first place.

UN agencies have requested 584 million dollars to cover their Afghan programme over the next six months. The United States Thursday pledged 320 million dollars, some of which would go to governments in the region.

"This is needed: Afghanistan is in the grip of a grave humanitarian crisis," the joint NGO statement said.

'US buildup may threaten Gulf states' existence'

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's ruling Baath party warned Gulf governments Friday that the US military buildup in the region could lead to "dramatic changes" in their countries and boost Washington's hold on their oil wealth.

"The continuing presence of a US armada in Gulf waters, amid politically-motivated threats by the US administration against presumed enemies, might drag Gulf states into protracted conflicts and wars with unpredictable consequences," said Ath-Thawra, the party's mouthpiece.

"It is not unlikely that some of these states will experience dramatic changes affecting not only their (political) orientations but also their existence," the paper said.

Australia lifts ban on Fiji

AFP, Sydney

Sanctions imposed on Fiji last year in the aftermath of an attempted coup and suspension of parliament were lifted Friday, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said.

The decision to lift its sanctions means Australia will resume military relations with Fiji, which is also a member of the Commonwealth.

However, Fiji's participation in Commonwealth forums, including the now-postponed heads of government meeting originally scheduled to begin in Brisbane this week, remain suspended pending the restoration of a democratic government.

Mubarak marks 20 yrs as head of state

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak celebrates 20 years as head of state this month under the specter of Islamic militant violence that now haunts not only Egypt but the rest of the world.

Mubarak came to power in the days after Egypt's Islamic Jihad assassinated president Anwar Sadat on October 6, 1981 as he reviewed a military parade in Cairo, its militants firing into the reviewing stand from the parade line itself.

The former fighter pilot was wounded in that gunfire and has since survived at least 10 plots to kill him, most of them by Islamic militants.

Plane crashes in Brazil: 5 killed

AP, Rio de Janeiro

A twin engine plane carrying the owners and employees of a local supermarket chain crashed Thursday in northeastern Brazil, killing all five people aboard, officials said.

The plane crashed as the pilot was trying to pull off an emergency landing in western Bahia some 700 miles (1,100 kms) north of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's Department of Civil Aviation said in a statement.

The plane took off in Serra Dourada, Bahia and was traveling to the midwestern state of Tocantins when the crash occurred. Officials were still investigating what caused the pilot to attempt an emergency landing.

Aboard the plane were Gentil Barbosa Filho and his brother Fabio Jose Barbosa, who inherited the G.

Pakistan opens process of talks with ex-Afghan king

AFP, Islamabad

The Taliban's days as the ruling power in Afghanistan appeared numbered Friday after the country's former monarch received a request from neighbouring Pakistan to begin talks on the formation of a new government for the war-ravaged state.

Italian foreign ministry officials confirmed that former Afghan monarch Mohammed Zahir Shah had received a letter from Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf requesting the urgent dispatch of an envoy to Islamabad for talks on the political future of Afghanistan.

Musharraf, until recently the main backer of the ruling Taliban regime, handed the letter to Italy's Deputy Foreign Minister Margherita Boniver during talks in Islamabad on Wednesday.

The development came on a day of behind-the-scenes diplomacy in

the Italian capital, which has played host to the exiled king since he was removed in a coup in 1973 after ruling the Central Asian country for 40 years.

Zahir Shah and his advisors held talks with top US diplomat Richard Haass, US President George W. Bush's special envoy to Northern Ireland.

His advisors said he was also awaiting an envoy from the Taliban's stronghold of Kandahar as part of the intensifying quest for a post-Taliban administration in his country.

Pakistan had been the chief backer of Afghanistan's hardline Islamic regime prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

Since those attacks, blamed on the Afghan-based extremist Osama bin Laden, the ex-king has been at the centre of efforts to replace the Taliban regime.

On Monday, he forged a deal with Afghan opposition groups to form a supreme council that would elect a head of state and transitional government if the Taliban fell.

The diplomatic flurry came against a background of intensifying US preparations for military strikes against suspected terrorist networks in Afghanistan and signs from within the country that the Taliban's power structure is crumbling.

Top opposition commander Ismail Khan told AFP on Thursday that Afghans in the western provinces of Ghor and Bagdhis were rising up against the Taliban rulers and predicted both provinces would fall within a week.

"The most important fact is that civilians in these two provinces are rising against the Taliban. They do not want to be under Taliban rule," said Khan, one of the most powerful commanders fighting the Taliban.

Nobel Literature Prize Speculation runs wild

AFP, Stockholm

As literary circles argue and speculate over the upcoming Nobel Literature Prize announcement, the names of worthy laureates resurface as they do every year but the Swedish Academy has remained tight-lipped.

French poet and art critic Yves Bonnefoy, American authors Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates and South Africa's J.M. Coetzee are all said to be on the short list for the prestigious prize, according to Sweden's publishing houses and literary critics.

V.S. Naipaul of Trinidad, Britain's Doris Lessing, Thomas Pynchon of the United States, Hugo Claus of Belgium and Cees Nootboom of The Netherlands are also rumored to be in the running this year, as the Nobel Prizes celebrate their 100th anniversary.

"In reality, no one in Stockholm knows who the 2001 Nobel literature laureate will be, but the only serious rumour we have heard lately

is French poet Yves Bonnefoy," Nils Peter Sundberg, of the respected Norstedts publishing house, told AFP.

Anders Paulryd, critic for the tabloid daily Aftonbladet, agreed that Bonnefoy was a strong candidate.

The 78-year-old Frenchman "would be an excellent choice," he said, adding: "He was already a hot candidate two years ago when Guenther Grass of Germany won."

Paulryd said there were at least 20 or 30 "possible candidates" for the prize, which last year went to Chinese-born writer Gao Xingjian. He stressed the difficulty of predicting the winner out of a multitude of strong writers, especially as the Academy grows more secretive.

"It may sound strange, but the Swedish public is less interested in the Nobel Literature Prize than the public in France, Italy or the United States," Paulryd said.

The exact date of the Literature Prize announcement is not known yet.

Post-terror trauma boosts Americans' partner hunt

AFP, Los Angeles

Post-terror trauma is boosting Americans' sex drive, sending singles in search of partners and bringing new passion to marital bedrooms, according to psychologists, who say sex is a primal tool to battle fear.

The experts believe that disasters and rumblings of war trigger a feeling of danger that can stimulate the libido.

The theory could be clearly demonstrated in nine to 10 months, when the birthrate may jump, said Gail Wyatt, a clinical psychology professor at the University of California in Los Angeles.

The September 11 terrorist onslaught is "a very scary thing that makes us all feel so vulnerable, and sex makes us feel very strong and very powerful and very vital," she said.

"With a need to confirm that you are loved and can connect physically it's just natural that a person might be more sexually interested in times like this," she said.

And, when in fear, sex just feels right. "All of your hormones seem to be working, and you are breathing heavily and your heart is beating faster and so it gives you that sense of being very much alive and vital," said Wyatt.

Mary Andres, a clinical psychologist at the University of South California says a large number of her patients have demonstrated a greater urge for sex since the attacks.

This is particularly true for people who find it difficult to express their feelings, she said.

India plans federal agency to tackle cross-border crime

AFP, New Delhi

Top Indian security officials on Friday discussed plans to create a federal detective agency which would focus on gathering information on militants New Delhi suspects are supported by Pakistan.

"A federal agency to deal with federal crimes was discussed," India's junior home minister I.D. Swamy was quoted by NDTV as saying after the meeting.

"A federal agency will look into crimes that are not confined to one state, like cross-border terrorism and (Pakistan's) Inter Services Intelligence activities, but have ramifications for the entire country."

India accuses Pakistan of "cross-border terrorism" for its backing of militant groups in Indian-controlled Kashmir, where an armed insurgency since 1989 has claimed

more than 35,000 lives.

India charges that Pakistan fuels the insurgency, but Islamabad says it only provides moral and diplomatic support to a home-grown struggle for self-determination.

The meeting had been called in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States as well as an attack by an Islamic militant suicide squad in Kashmir on Monday which killed 38 people.

At the meeting Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani met with police chiefs and chief secretaries of states to discuss internal security.

A high-level security alert was sparked off on midnight Wednesday over the supposed hijacking of an Indian airliner which later turned out to be a hoax.



PHOTO: AFP

From left: India Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani attend the funeral of senior Congress Party leader Madhav Rao Scindia in Gwalior on Thursday in Madhya Pradesh state. Scindia, a refined Oxford graduate and member of a former royal family, had often been viewed as an heir to Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi. More than 300,000 people attended the funeral.

25 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Twenty-one Muslim separatists and four other people have been killed in fierce fighting with Indian security forces in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said Friday.

Eleven Islamic separatists were shot dead Friday in a clash near the town of Mendhar, 430 km south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, police said.

Police said the encounter erupted when Indian security forces sealed off the village of Singhpora. The militants tried to shoot their way out of the cordon, but security forces returned fire and killed the separatists.

Three separatists were killed overnight in a separate cordon-and-

search operation in Banihal, a town 100 km north of Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Three more militants died in an overnight clash with the Indian army in the southern border township of Poonch.

Meanwhile a local official of Kashmir's ruling National Conference was abducted and shot dead by suspected militants near Awantipora, 30 kilometers (18 miles) south of Srinagar, police said.

No group has claimed responsibility for the killing.

Police also recovered two beheaded bodies of counter-insurgency police officers overnight at Sogam village in the northern Kupwara district, the spokesman

said. The Indian army later shot dead two militants in the region, although they were not immediately linked to the killings.

Two militants were shot dead by troops at Wusan village, 35 km north of Srinagar, police said.

A civilian died when militants and security forces exchanged fire at Sheikhpora village in central Budgam district Friday, police said.

Residents charged that counter-insurgency police had opened indiscriminate fire without provocation. They later took to streets chanting anti-India slogans, and set fire to a jeep belonging to the counter-insurgency police. Police used force to disperse them.

Violence shakes ME truce bid

AFP, Jerusalem

A last-ditch Palestinian effort to salvage a wobbly ceasefire was shaken Friday after five Palestinians were killed in the flashpoint city of Hebron and an Israeli was gunned down in a road-side ambush.

Before the latest violence, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement urged Palestinians to stick to a truce with Israel for the sake of the Palestinian cause.

But that bid was sent reeling, with five Palestinians killed and 17 wounded after Israeli tanks, backed by helicopters, entered Palestinian-controlled areas of Hebron before dawn, police and hospital sources

said. Fighting persisted throughout the morning, with Israeli troops poised on Palestinian rooftops, and at least one Palestinian home destroyed.

In another blow to the sickly truce-consolidation accord, hammered out nine days ago by Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, a car of Palestinian gunmen shot dead an Israeli and wounded another on a road near the northern West Bank town of Tulkarim, Israeli settler sources said.

The attack was claimed by the "Return Brigade" of Fatah.

The death toll for the year-old Palestinian uprising now stands at 862, including 664 Palestinians and 175 Israelis.

The PLO's executive committee, after an overnight meeting chaired by Arafat in the West Bank town of Ramallah, had called on "all forces and factions to strictly respect the ceasefire to preserve the Palestinian national interest," the official Wafa news agency reported.

The Palestinians were trying to douse the flames of violence that have left some 40 dead and hundreds wounded since the Arafat-Peres meeting.

Fatah and the PLO executive committee also warmly welcomed US President George W. Bush's public remarks Tuesday in favour of a Palestinian state as "a cornerstone to security, stability and peace in the Middle East."

REUTERS, Washington

As part of its anti-terror war, the Bush administration is considering how it can help ensure the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, US officials say.

The issue is extremely sensitive. It involves the stability of Pakistan's government as it comes under pressure for siding with the United States and plays into already tense relations between Pakistan and its nuclear rival, India.

Some US officials are wary of being seen as taking any steps that might legitimise or advance Pakistan's nuclear program, which Washington for years has tried to thwart with diplomacy and sanctions.

But officials acknowledged that the US approach to Islamabad's nuclear program is under active review as Washington moves toward military action in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks in New York and on the Pentagon.

"There's a lot of work going on at the moment, lots of meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday about how we should manage this," one senior US official said about the nuclear security issue.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) greets British Prime Minister Tony Blair during their meeting in the Kremlin on Thursday in Moscow.

Russia, Iran to step up military cooperation

AFP, Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told visiting Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani that Moscow was interested in expanding its cooperation with Tehran after sealing an arms deal that could be worth some seven billion dollars.

"Only through continuing such interaction will we be able to guarantee security and establish stability in a region adjacent to our countries," Interfax quoted Ivanov as telling Shamkhani.

He added that last month's attacks in the United States "strikingly demonstrated the need to pool the efforts of the international community in resisting terrorism."

Defense analysts earlier told AFP that a new military cooperation deal between Moscow and Tehran could be worth around seven billion dollars in Russian arms exports.

The agreement sealed Tuesday by Shamkhani includes the purchase of Iskander long-range supersonic missiles and Yakhont anti-ship missiles, said Razhbjab Safarov, director of the Center for Coordination between Russia and Iran, who is close to the negotiations.