

UN climate treaty salvaged

AFP, Marrakesh

Negotiators agreed a deal here Saturday to seal the UN's Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the cornerstone of efforts to combat looming climate change, but at the cost of major concessions.

"We have an agreement," British Environment Minister Michael Meacher said.

"There is an agreement by everyone on everything," his French counterpart, Yves Cochet, said.

The draft package was being put to a pre-dawn plenary session of Kyoto signatories.

If approved, it would end nearly four years of negotiations to complete the rulebook of the world's most ambitious climate treaty.

But -- just as at an eerily similar bargaining session in Bonn, less than four months earlier -- the deal was only achieved thanks to painful concessions by the European Union (EU).

"The main thing is that we have saved the Kyoto Protocol" said a spokesman for Belgium, the EU's current president.

Greenpeace described the outcome as "a hard-won battle for a token outcome."

Kyoto is an offshoot of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Signed in 1997, it requires more than three

dozen industrialised countries to cut emissions of carbon-based gases by more than five percent by 2008-2012 compared with their 1990 levels.

Greenhouse gases are carbon substances that are mainly the unwanted by-product of burning oil, gas and coal.

Over the past century, so many billion tonnes of these gases have been released as a result of industrialisation that the Earth's atmosphere is gradually warming, driving the climate system towards potentially calamitous change, scientists say.

The draft compromise gave enormous concessions on forestry demanded by Russia.

Forests and agricultural land are called "carbon sinks" because they absorb greenhouse gas pollution through photosynthesis. They thus become an asset which can be partially offset against national targets of pollution cuts.

A tactical alliance of four countries -- Australia, Canada, Japan and Russia -- demanded huge allocations of "sinks" at talks in Bonn in July that saved Kyoto from collapse.

Their goal, as in Japan's case, was to ease the cost of meeting the Kyoto targets or, as in Russia's case, to sell lots of emissions entitlements on the world's future carbon market.

In Bonn, Russia had agreed to 17.6 million

carbon tonnes per year in "sinks," but then came back for more. The Marrakesh deal would meet its demands for 33 million tonnes per year.

Environmentalists had angrily opposed this, warning that polluting countries could simply buy cheap Russian carbon quotas to meet their targets rather than reduce their greenhouse gases.

Russia has huge emissions quotas to sell because the collapse of the Soviet economy and its gradual conversion to cleaner technology means it produces far less carbon dioxide than in 1990.

The other part of the deal centered on criteria allowing access to Kyoto's so-called flexibility mechanisms.

These are innovations that would harness market forces to help the industrialised world reach its target of cutting greenhouse-gas pollution without economic pain.

The conference of environment ministers had been due to end late Friday.

But it spilled over into the early hours of Saturday, as the four-nation Umbrella Group refused to approve a compromise on the two sticking points.

Kyoto must be ratified by a sufficient number of industrialised countries in order to enter into force, a process that itself has potential pitfalls.



An Afghan Taliban fighter sits on a battle tank pondering his next move in the north of the Afghan capital Kabul on Saturday as the ruling Taliban lost the main northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif to the opposition forces late Friday. Now Taliban forces have been waiting for a major war here in the north of the capital.

US to boycott UN talks on N-test ban treaty

AFP, Washington

The United States said late Friday it would boycott a weekend UN meeting aimed at pushing the implementation of a major nuclear test ban treaty.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Washington would not be represented at the meeting, set to begin on Sunday on the sidelines of the annual UN General Assembly session, on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) despite an invitation to attend that had been extended to it.

"The conference is for countries which have ratified the CTBT," he said in a brief written answer to a question asked at Thursday's State Department news briefing.

Israeli army snatches 12 Palestinians in night raid

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army arrested 12 Palestinian militants in an overnight raid into autonomous Palestinian territory in the northern West Bank, a military statement said Saturday.

An Israeli unit backed by armour entered the village of Araqa, west of Jenin, on the trail of Palestinians who shot dead an Israeli woman at the wheel of her car on Friday.

The troops arrested 12 Palestinians "suspected of involvement in terrorist activities" and destroyed the house of a gunman who killed three Israelis in Afula, northern Israel, on October 4, the communiqué said.

8 burned to death as diesel tanker explodes in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

At least eight people burnt to death after a diesel tanker they were travelling in hit a wall on a highway in western Nepal and burst into flames, police said Saturday.

Another two people were seriously injured when the diesel tanker late Friday collided with a roadside wall, burst into flames and then tumbled 300 feet (92 metres) down the mountains, police said.

The eight people were killed on the spot and were charred beyond recognition, police said.

Fallout over Monica Clinton gives up SC privileges

AFP, Washington

Former US President Bill Clinton on Friday gave up his privilege to argue cases before the US Supreme Court, in the latest fallout from his affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

On October 1, the high court suspended Clinton's right to make arguments there, and gave him until Friday to submit his reasons for why he should not be permanently banned from making arguments there.

The right to make arguments before the US high court is limited to a select coterie of attorneys from across the United States who gain admission to the Supreme Court "bar."

Lanka welcomes Canadian ban on Tamil Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka on Saturday welcomed a Canadian ban on Tamil Tiger guerrillas and said the move could block millions of dollars that would otherwise go to finance their war in the island.

The Canadian High Commission said Friday that Ottawa included the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a list of terrorist organisations and individuals targeted for freezing their assets.

India rewards nuclear scientist

AFP, New Delhi

Rajagopala Chidambaram, a key scientist behind India's nuclear programme, has been appointed the principal scientific advisor to the Indian government, the Press Trust of India reported Saturday.

Chidambaram, former chairman of India's Atomic Energy Commission, will replace A.P.J. Kalam, widely credited as the brains behind India's missile programme.

Chidambaram was a central figure in the design and execution of India's first nuclear blast in 1974 at Pokhran in western Rajasthan state.

US makes 'significant gains' in Afghan war: Cheney

AFP, London

United States Vice-President Dick Cheney said Saturday the allies had made "significant gains" in Afghanistan after opposition forces backed by US air strikes took the key city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

In an interview with the Sun, a popular British tabloid, Cheney said: "I think the air campaign is bound to have an impact."

"I'm comfortable we're making significant progress, especially in this report (about the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif) is correct."

He added: "To lose Mazar-i-

Sharif would be a significant development, a significant defeat for (the Taliban) because they worked hard to continually try and reinforce it."

"But even apart from that I think you can see we've done enormous damage to the Taliban in terms of their military assets and capabilities."

Interviewed by telephone from Washington, Cheney said he expected the immediate war aims -- "taking down" Osama bin Laden, the chief suspect in the September 11 terror attacks in the US, his al-Qaeda organisation, and Afghanistan's ruling Taliban regime -- to be achieved during President

George W. Bush's first term in office.

"But in terms of the struggle against terrorism on a worldwide basis, that may well last longer," Cheney added.

He declined to say whether an advance towards Kabul by the opposition Northern Alliance assisted by the US-led coalition could be expected soon.

Cheney told the Sun he believed that in recent days the prolonged airstrikes on the Taliban frontline had begun to prompt Taliban members to think about severing ties with their leadership, or even defecting.

Myanmar dismisses top generals

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has fired two high-ranking officials in what appears to be the most significant shake-up of the junta in years, official reports and analysts said Saturday.

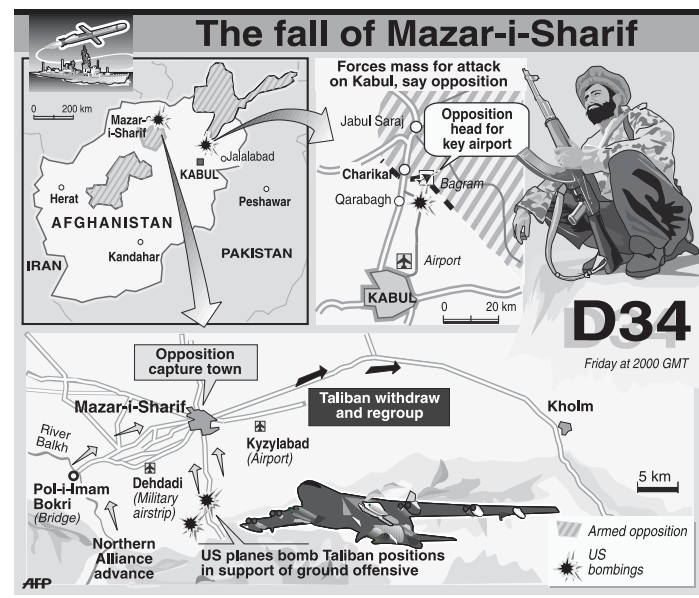
Third Secretary Lieutenant-General Win Myint of the ruling State Peace and Development Council and Lieutenant-General Tin Hla, a deputy prime minister and military affairs minister were removed from their posts, the reports said.

The reshuffle was ordered by

the junta's powerful intelligence chief, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, in statements published by state newspapers including the New Light of Myanmar.

Both Win Myint, the regime's fourth-ranking general, and Tin Hla had been deeply involved in the economic workings of the military state and headed its state business enterprises -- Myanmar economic holdings and Myanmar economic corporation.

No reason was given for their dismissal, and successors have not been named for their political posts.



US military sanctions likely to end: Indian FM

AFP, New Delhi

US restrictions on the sale of military supplies to India will likely be lifted following President George W. Bush's summit with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was quoted saying Saturday.

Speaking to Indian journalists in Washington, Singh also denied a magazine report that New Delhi had rejected a US proposal to make India a military counterweight to China and regional Islamic states.

Singh said that as a result of the Bush-Vajpayee summit, he expected US military sanctions imposed on India since the Cold War to be lifted during a US-Indian bilateral defence meeting next month in New Delhi.

The understanding will clear the way for India to

receive supplies "which we believe are needed for defence preparedness of the armed forces of the country," Singh said, quoted by the Press Trust of India.

In September, Bush partially lifted US sanctions against India and Pakistan which were imposed in 1998 after they carried out nuclear weapons tests. But the United States continues a longstanding ban on exports to India of some strategic equipment.

Singh called Vajpayee's visit to the United States "a total success."

"The objectives we had set for ourselves -- the United States and India -- have been fully and adequately realised," he was quoted saying.

He said Vajpayee and Bush's first meeting was "extremely warm, very candid, full of mutual regard, and with the conversation marked by goodwill, candour and trust."

UK journalists thrown out of Pakistan

AFP, Quetta

A journalist and a photographer working for a British newspaper have been thrown out of Pakistan for trying to book a flight in the name of 'O.B. Laden', police said Saturday.

Sunday Telegraph reporter Christina Lamb and photographer Justin Sutcliffe were escorted from their rooms at the Serena Hotel in Quetta in the early hours of Friday morning, hotel staff said.

They were taken to a government rest house then put on a flight to either Karachi or Islamabad from where they were to connect to London, a police officer, who did not want to be identified, said.

Laden denies marriage to Mullah Omar's daughter

AFP, Islamabad

Saudi-born Islamic militant Osama bin Laden denied reports he had married a daughter of Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, in an interview with a Pakistani newspaper published Saturday.

"All my wives are Arabs," bin Laden told the editor of the Pakistani Urdu daily Ausaf in the interview published by the English-language paper Dawn.

"I have a spiritual relationship with Mullah Omar," bin Laden told Ausaf editor Hamid Mir in the interview conducted at an undisclosed location near Kabul on November 7.

Australian PM wins 3rd term

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister John Howard swept back to power for a historic third term Saturday in a triumph widely attributed to the strength of public support for his hardline refugee policies.

Although the opposition had not conceded defeat, computer projections gave Howard's Liberal-National coalition a likely majority of 10 seats in an expanded 150-seat Australian parliament.

Treasurer Peter Costello, number two in the government, told supporters in Melbourne: "This has been a great victory, a very, very large swing against the Labour Party."

Howard had a wafer slim major-



ity after the last election in 1998, holding 11 seats categorised as extreme marginals, with a majority of under one percent.

But with about 40 percent of the national vote counted, the coalition appeared to have won a swing of about two percent and Labour was struggling to pick up ground in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

The results pointed to a coalition victory before any votes were counted in Western Australia, which is three hours behind the eastern states.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's computer projection gave Howard's Liberal Party 66 seats, their coalition partners, the National Party, 14 seats and Labour 67 seats, with three seats going to independents in the 150-seat House of Representatives.

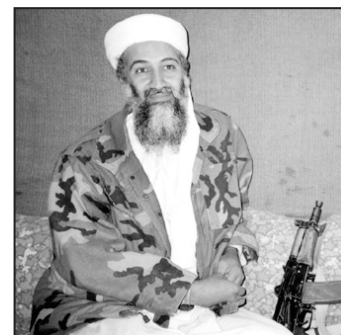
'Bin Laden in high spirits'

AFP, Islamabad

He's in high spirits, speaking confidently and laughing readily, Osama bin Laden is a man at ease even though he feels the Americans will eventually kill him, his Pakistani interviewer said Saturday.

Journalist Hamid Mir ratcheted up the world's jitters Saturday with an exclusive interview with bin Laden in which the suspected terrorist mastermind said he had nuclear and chemical weapons and was ready to use them.

Mir, who published the interview in Pakistan's English-language newspaper Dawn, says he met with bin Laden in 1997 and 1998. When he saw the shadowy Saudi millionaire this time in Afghanistan, he found him greatly changed.



"Previously he was very softspoken," the 36-year-old Mir told AFP. "But now he speaks like an experienced orator. He is very hard-hitting. He was in high spirits. He's very healthy and he laughs a lot."

"He's very critical about the government of Pakistan."

40 wedding guests killed in Kerala landslide



Residents crowd around a bulldozer removing debris after a landslide in Amboori some 30 km from Trivandrum on Saturday. At least 40 people died in the landslide when a house in which they had gathered for a wedding was buried by mud from a hill.

AFP, New Delhi

At least 40 people died in a landslide in southern India when a house in which they had gathered for a wedding was buried by mud from a hill, officials said Saturday.

Fifty people were in the two-storey house in the city of Trivandrum when the landslide struck Friday at 8:45 pm (15:15 GMT), said Shashi Kumar Nayyar, press secretary to the chief minister of Kerala.

"They were sleeping in a house when the side of the hill caved in all of a sudden," Nayyar told AFP.

"So far 40 bodies have been recovered. We fear that there could be 10 more people lying buried," he said, adding that it was difficult to estimate the exact toll as guests had come from different places for the ceremony.

The house, in the hilly eastern district of the Kerala state capital, was engulfed following heavy rains which stopped Saturday morning.

Nayyar said police and volunteers were racing against time to dig through the debris in a bid to save anybody trapped alive.

"They are trying their level best to save whoever is alive," he said. "There is not much hope, although we are trying very hard."

He said two other houses which were standing in the path of the collapsed building were also destroyed completely, but that alert boys living in the houses managed to drag adult residents to safety.

However, at least two people living in another house were feared to have died.

C.D. Thomas, the owner of the house where the wedding was to be held, escaped injury as he was visiting a neighbour when the accident happened, although his son, the bridegroom, was feared to have died.

Four other houses in the city were partially damaged by the landslide, authorities said.

Earth-moving machinery was being used to search through the heavy pile of soil and rock boulders which had fallen on the house.

Nayyar said so far relief work had not been hampered by the weather.

"The operations are still going on. Fortunately, there is no rain except for some scattered showers, which has eased our job," Nayyar said.

Anti-terror war must not eclipse fight against poverty: Annan

UNGA debate session begins

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged world leaders on Saturday not to allow the war on terrorism to divert them from the fight against poverty, AIDS and environmental degradation, his office said.

In a speech opening the seven-day general debate of the United Nations General Assembly, Annan reiterated "four burning issues" as priorities for his second five-year term, which begins January 1.

At least 43 heads of state and government and 115 foreign ministers are due to speak in the debate, which is being held amid unprecedented security ordered after the destruction of New York's twin World Trade Center towers on September 11.

"We share in the pain and grief of our host country and our host city," Annan began in a speech distributed in advance to reporters. "Like them, we are determined to overcome the forces that inflicted this ordeal on us."

But, he said, it would "give the terrorists a kind of victory" if the world body and its member states focused all their energies on fighting terror.

"None of the issues that faced us on September 10 has become less urgent," he added.

Recalling the ambitious goals of the millennium summit at the start of last year's general debate, he said his first priority was to eradicate extreme poverty.

The summit resolved to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of people in the world who live on less than one dollar a day, who suffer from hunger and who are unable to reach or afford safe drinking water.

"Much must be done by the developing countries," Annan will tell this year's debate, "but to reach the point where they can really benefit from market opportunities, they need generous help from developed countries."