

Karzai returns to Kabul after diplomatic blitz

AFP, Kabul

Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai returned to Kabul Friday morning after a trip that took him to Saudi Arabia, an international donors' conference in Tokyo, China and Tajikistan.

Arriving on an Air Tajikistan flight at the recently reopened Kabul International Airport, Karzai was met by a guard of honour and a military band.

He was due to hold talks later with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who arrived from Islamabad shortly afterwards.

Musharraf to meet Bush

Feb 13

AFP, Washington

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf will meet President George W. Bush at the White House on February 13, officials said Thursday.

The visit fits into an intense US diplomatic effort to cool tensions between India and Pakistan following an attack on parliament in New Delhi on December 13.

Musharraf, who has been the target of intense US pressure since attacks on the United States on September 11, and was forced to abandon Pakistan's links to the Taliban, which harbored terror suspect Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.

Myanmar Muslims invade UN agency in Malaysia to seek asylum

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

More than two dozen Muslim illegal immigrants from military-ruled Myanmar on Friday invaded the grounds of the UN refugee agency in Malaysia to seek asylum.

A total of 28 immigrants from Myanmar's minority Rohingya Muslim community entered the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) centre here at dawn and camped in the compound.

Police were called and kept guard outside the UNHCR building. "We came here to ask them to help us find a solution to our situation, to find a way to ensure our lives are safe," Abib Peter, 36, told reporters through the centre's fence.

Britain to soften stance on Zimbabwe sanctions

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw will soften his line on Zimbabwe, the British press said Friday, preferring not to introduce targeted sanctions against its President Robert Mugabe.

Straw said last month that Britain would press for Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth if political violence in the country continued, and also raised the prospect of sanctions.

The Financial Times reported that Britain is now concerned that if it pushes for immediate sanctions against Mugabe, the Zimbabwean president might reject international observers for elections there in March.

"We do not want to do anything that will make it more likely that Mugabe could win the election," a British official told the FT.

India tests Agni missile

Test threatens regional stability: Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India on Friday tested a short-range version of its nuclear-capable Agni I missile, despite renewed international appeals to reduce military tensions with rival Pakistan.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Nirupama Rao said the missile, tested at around 8:50 am (0320 GMT) from the Chandipur test range off the eastern coastal state of Orissa, had a range of less than 700 kilometres (440 miles).

"The test was taken in a non-provocative manner across international waters," Rao said, adding that Pakistan had been informed in advance, along with the five nuclear powers -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.

"We are perfectly convinced about the legitimacy of this step," Rao said. "We have no intention to engage in an arms race."

India and Pakistan have been poised for war since New Delhi blamed two Pakistan-based militant groups for the deadly December 13 attack on its parliament.

The nuclear neighbours have massed an estimated 800,000 troops on their common border and India has refused to reduce its

deployment until Pakistan takes sufficient steps to stop what the government here terms "cross-border terrorism."

Rao insisted that the test had been planned far in advance and the timing on the eve of India's Republic Day was determined "solely by technical factors" and was not meant to send any political message.

"It has no political significance or relationship to any political event."

The Agni I missile has a maximum range of 1,500 kilometres (940 miles), making it capable of reaching targets deep inside Pakistani territory and parts of China.

India's last Agni test was in January 2001 of the Agni II, which has a maximum range of 2,500 kilometres (1,560 miles).

Pakistan had condemned that test as a "direct threat" to its national security.

Friday's test came a day after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, on a visit to Islamabad, stressed the need for an immediate military de-escalation on the Indo-Pakistan border.

The Agni series is considered crucial to India's plans for developing an effective nuclear deterrent following its shock underground nuclear tests in May 1998, which were met by

Pakistan conducting its own tests.

The Indian tests also sent ties with Beijing into a downward spiral after New Delhi cited a perceived threat from neighbouring China as part justification.

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited India earlier this month.

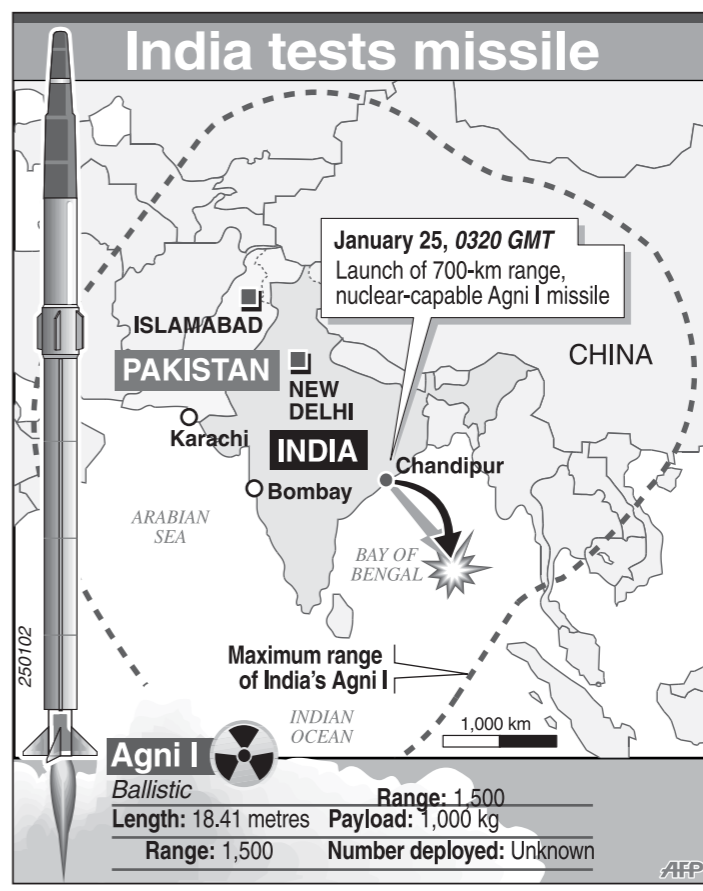
The intermediate range of the Agni, which means "Fire" in Hindi, is seen more as a threat to China than to Pakistan, which can be reached with the 250 kilometre-range "Prithvi" (Earth) missile.

Unlike the Agni, the Prithvi has already been inducted for use by the army.

Meanwhile, Pakistan on Friday said an Indian missile test was "prejudicial" to regional stability and warned New Delhi that it was ready to defend itself against any aggression.

"We hope the international community will take note of this Indian behaviour which is prejudicial to the pursuit of stability in our region, especially during the current situation," a foreign office statement said.

"The test comes at a time of tensions when the Indian forces are massed on our borders... On its part, Pakistan favours a policy of restraint in the region."



Indian troops kill 10 militants

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces shot dead 10 Muslim separatist militants in Indian-administered Kashmir in three separate overnight encounters, police said Friday.

Indian border guards shot dead five militants at Darwan village on the foothills of the Himalayas, 30 kilometres southwest of Kashmir's summer capital, Srinagar, police said.

A border guard personnel also died during the fighting, which broke out after guards moved into the village on a tip-off.

Police said the slain militants were from the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed militant group.

Five more militants were shot dead overnight in the southern districts of Poonch and Rajouri in two separate encounters sparked by cordon and search operations.

The slain militants belonged to another Pakistan-based group, Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Jaish and Lashkar are accused by New Delhi of attacking the Indian parliament on December 13, leaving dead 14 people including the five gunmen.



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, left, gestures during his meeting with Hamid Karzai, chairman of the new Interim Government of Afghanistan (foreground right) following his arrival for a one-day visit in Kabul on Friday. Listening to him is Lakdar Brahimi (next to Annan), UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan and an unidentified UN official.

Annan makes historic visit to Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan visited Afghanistan Friday on an historic visit intended to launch the next phase of the war-torn nation's planned transition to stable government.

Annan, who is the first UN secretary general to step on Afghan soil since 1959, met interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai and visited a recently reopened girls' school.

No details were immediately available of Annan's meeting with Karzai, who returned from an overseas trip just minutes before the UN chief arrived from Islamabad, where he held talks with Pakistani leaders.

Annan was due to hold a press conference later before flying to Iran.

His visit came amid rising concern over the security situation, with increasing reports of banditry, lawlessness, factional fighting and tribal tensions around the country.

Annan flew into Kabul barely 24 hours after US special forces engaged remnants of the Taliban regime in southern Kandahar province in a grim reminder that the shooting war was far from won.

His trip to the region is aiming to bolster both international and Afghan commitment to bringing peace and stability to a nation which in the past 23 years has seen Soviet occupation, battling warlords and the Taliban.

It comes in the wake of the goodwill generated by the international donors' conference in Tokyo earlier this week, which produced pledges of 4.5 billion dollars in aid for Afghanistan over five years.

"I hope we can count on sustained international support, sustained not only in terms of financial and material terms but also political and moral support," Annan said in Islamabad Thursday.

Ahmed Fawzi, spokesman for UN special envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, said Friday the visit would demonstrate the world body's commitment to the country.

"It is to express solidarity with the people of Afghanistan in their time of need."

India hints at long-term troops deployment along Pak border

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani ruled out Friday any troop reduction on the border with Pakistan, saying it would take at least "a couple of months" to judge whether there had been any let-up in "cross-border terrorism."

"At the moment, the decision is the present situation will continue," Advani told reporters when asked if India would pull back troops massed on the border.

"I have maintained that to be able to judge if there has been any let up or any diminution in cross-border infiltration, the government would

need at least a couple of months," he said.

Indian and Pakistan have been readied for war -- with an estimated 800,000 troops massed on both sides of their shared border -- since New Delhi blamed two Pakistan-based militant groups for the deadly December 13 attack on its parliament.

Does mobile phone pose any health hazard?

AFP, London

The British government was to launch a seven-million-pound (10-million-dollar) research programme Friday into the possible health risks caused by mobile phones.

The study, jointly backed by industry, comes two years after a government inquiry reported no evidence to suggest mobile phones were a health hazard and could cause brain or nervous system cancers.

However, the report did conclude that radiation from handsets and base station masts could cause "subtle biological changes."

It recommended a "precautionary" approach, which has since been adopted by the government.

This included advice that children should not use mobiles for too long or too often.

US mulls ban on Arafat

Several hurt in suicide attack, 2 Hamas men killed

REUTERS, Washington

President George W. Bush's top foreign policy advisers will meet on Friday to consider sanctions against Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for allegedly trying to buy arms from Iran, USA Today reported.

The newspaper, citing diplomatic sources, said in its Today edition that Bush's foreign policy team planned to meet to recommend sanctions that might include suspending the peacemaking mission of his Middle East envoy, Anthony Zinni.

The report indicated that Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice would participate in today's meeting. It said a senior State Department official declined to confirm where the meeting would take place.

The newspaper quoted the State Department source as saying top administration officials had been debating all week what course of action to take against Arafat.

Asked about the report, a State Department spokesman declined to say if such a meeting was planned or whether punitive action against Arafat was under discussion.

USA Today, citing unnamed sources, said the senior officials were weighing steps that could go as far as severing ties with the Palestinian authority.

The paper quoted its sources as saying Bush was more likely to adopt sanctions that might include ordering Zinni to suspend efforts to arrange a cease fire between Israel and the Palestinians and closing the Palestinian Authority's Washington Office.

Zinni, a retired Marine Corps general, ended his second trip to the Middle East two weeks ago. He had

been expected to return about now but no date has been set.

The United States has demanded that Arafat explain an arms shipment intercepted by Israel in the Red Sea on Jan. 3. Israel said the ship was carrying 50 tonnes of munitions manufactured in Iran and bound for the Palestinian-ruled Gaza Strip.

"It is a threat not only to Israel, but to Chairman Arafat," he said.

Meanwhile, at least 14 people were wounded in a suicide attack Friday in Tel Aviv, army radio said, as Israeli troops shot dead two militants of the Palestinian Islamic radical movement Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

A police official, interviewed on the radio, said the Tel Aviv bombing was carried out by a man on a motorcycle. The attack took place near an old bus station, an area which was immediately cordoned off by police.

Iraq may soften stand on return of arms inspectors

AFP, Baghdad

Drained by 11-year-old sanctions and facing a possible US strike, Iraq could soften its opposition to the return of UN arms inspectors in the hope of seeing that elusive "light at the end of the tunnel," diplomats say.

Despite its fiery rhetoric, Baghdad might acquiesce in a compromise formula to pave the way for the inspectors' return -- possibly for a limited period and with a well-defined mission -- while also enabling it to save face.

The search is underway, notably by Russia, for "a settlement or formula that would meet Iraq's demand for a lifting or suspension of the (UN) embargo in exchange for the inspectors' return," one Baghdad-based Western diplomat

told AFP.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tarek Aziz is currently in Moscow for talks aimed at persuading Russia to block US moves to introduce a new "smart" UN sanctions regime for Iraq.

Aziz said Thursday that one of the main aims of his visit was to discuss Iraq's ties with the United Nations. "I hope Russia will help us. Russia is a traditional friend of Iraq," Aziz said after talks with Communist Party chief Gennady Zyuganov.

Russian foreign ministry sources said last week that Moscow would use Aziz's visit to press Baghdad to resume cooperation with the inspectors in return for the suspension of UN sanctions, imposed on Iraq since its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Australia won't back down on detention of migrants

AFP, Sydney

Australia's conservative government refused to ease the country's hardline policy of detaining asylum seekers in prison camps despite facing an escalating crisis Friday after another 15 inmates attempted suicide or self-mutilation.

Prime Minister John Howard emphatically ruled out any changes to the mandatory detention of so-called "boat people", despite a written offer from a coalition of prominent charities and human rights groups to care for about 800 asylum seekers.

As 211 protesting Afghan inmates, including 37 children, at the Woomera Detention Centre in South Australia continued to refuse

food and water for a ninth day, Howard signalled that the policy would not be diluted.

An Immigration Department spokesman said 44 inmates -- including one child -- at Woomera had their lips sewn together as part of their protest at delays in processing their claims and the conditions in which they are being held.

"Overnight there were 15 self-harm attempts at the centre," the spokesman told AFP.

"Overall, there have been 29 cases of attempted self-poisoning and 22 of self-mutilation since the protest began."

On Thursday, a 16-year old boy was among up to 20 asylum seekers who tried to hang themselves.

India braces for Republic Day amid tight security

AFP, New Delhi

India began final security preparations Friday for its 53rd Republic Day celebrations, with a large portion of its army still camped on the border in a tense military face-off with rival Pakistan.

The Indian capital, where the main celebrations are being held on Saturday, was turned into a virtual fortress with nearly 50,000 security troops on duty to prevent threatened attacks by militant groups.

Mukesh Kumar Meena, deputy commissioner of the Delhi police, said helicopters would fly over the city while police sharpshooters would be posted atop key government buildings to prevent any attack on federal ministers.

"Over the years, the parade has become a security hazard with militants seeing it as an occasion to strike and grab newspaper headlines. This year we are on our toes," said Meena.

"Close monitoring has been mounted on the city's nine entry and exit points. Surprise checks are being carried out at hotels and guest houses in areas where

militants could possibly take shelter," said Meena.

Similar precautions were taken across the country but were especially rigorous in militancy-ridden provinces such as the Himalayan state of Kashmir and India's north-east.

India's Republic Day is always a tense time in Kashmir as Muslim militants fighting Indian rule routinely attempt to disrupt the official celebrations by firing rockets and launching grenade attacks.

Officials said two militant outfits have threatened attacks in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar at Bakshi Stadium, where army, paramilitary units and police will take part in an annual parade.

"They (the militants) will not succeed in their attempts," vowed Rajinder Bhullar, a senior officer in India's Border Security Force (BSF), the main force battling militants here.

Around a dozen militant groups in Kashmir observe the Republic Day as a "black day" and have warned the public against taking part in the official celebrations.

Security forces have begun sealing off several localities in

Srinagar and in the winter capital Jammu, to the resentment of some local residents who allege harassment.

"I've had to shift my family to a relative's home after the BSF took the upper story of my residence," said Abdul Ahah of Srinagar.

Security is unusually high this year in Calcutta, where unidentified gunmen on Tuesday killed four policemen in front of the American Center.

Some 13,000 policemen will be on duty at the parade grounds and will stop spectators from bringing in mobile telephones, cameras, pagers, binoculars or any bags, said Calcutta Police Deputy Commissioner Banibrata Basu.

In the western city of Bombay, India's commercial hub and film capital, police tightened security around government offices and the homes of prominent politicians, including headline Hindu leader Bal Thackeray, who is reported to be a militant target. At least 50,000 army, police and paramilitary personnel were also deployed across five of India's seven insurgency-wracked northeast states.



Soldiers patrol a stretch of railway track on Thursday at Guwahati railway station, in Guwahati, the capital of India's northeastern Assam state. At least 50,000 army, police and paramilitary personnel were deployed across five of India's seven insurgency-wracked northeast states. Over 45 civilians were gunned down by militants in the last ten days in the states of Tripura and Assam.