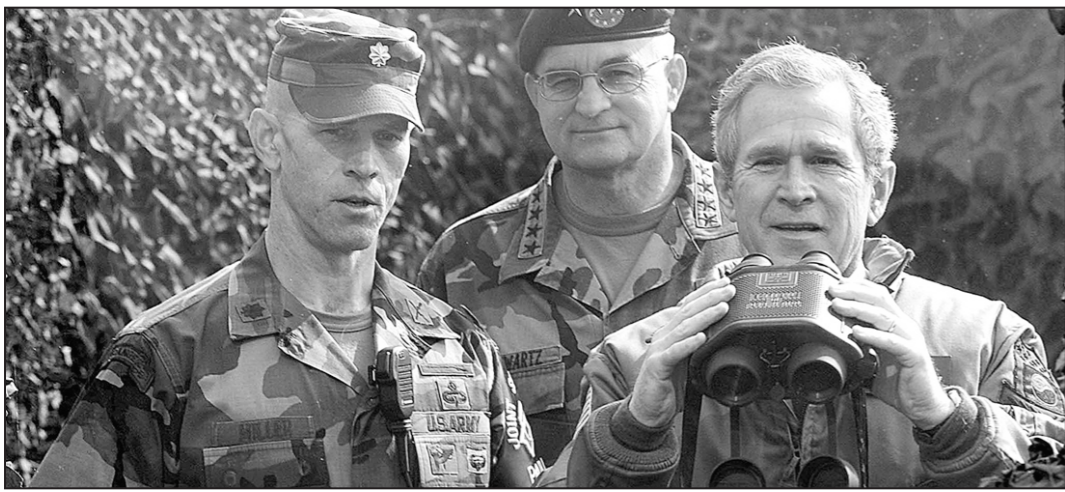


# Bush offers talks to 'despotic regime' of DPRK

## US promises not to invade North Korea



US President George W. Bush (R) looks across the demilitarized zone into North Korea through a bullet proof glass from Outpost Ouellette, a US Military base in the demilitarized zone between South and North Korea on Wednesday. At left is Lt. Col. William Miller, commander joint security area, and at center is General Thomas Schwartz, commander in charge of the US forces in Korea.

AFP, Dorasan

US President George W. Bush said Wednesday that the "despotic regime" in North Korea must change its ways but renewed an offer for talks despite concerns over its weapons program.

After a summit that focused on the North's missile sales and weapons of mass destruction, Bush and South Korea's President Kim Dae-Jung went to the edge of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) dividing the Korean peninsula to offer resumed dialogue.

The Pyongyang government and the tightly controlled media that it uses to communicate with the outside world remained silent about the summit.

The two leaders extended their one-to-one summit in Seoul from one hour to almost two in a sign of the importance now being given to North Korea during Bush's three-nation Asian tour.

Bush has repeatedly attacked North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il in recent weeks, saying his country was part of "an axis of evil" with Iran

and Iraq that was proliferating weapons.

"I will not change my opinion of Kim Jong-Il until he frees his people and accepts genuine proposals (for peace) from countries like South Korea," Bush told a press conference after the summit.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush promised Wednesday not to invade North Korea but rather work peacefully to achieve political change in the Stalinist state he had said belonged to an "axis of evil."

The assurance, delivered at a press conference after talks with South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, appeared to be aimed at assuaging concerns about Washington's new assertive stance on the world stages after early successes in its war in Afghanistan.

In his State of the Union address last month, Bush labelled North Korea, Iraq and Iran "an axis of evil" that threatens world peace through proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and support for terrorism.

# India seeks continued Pak support against terrorism

AFP, Srinagar

A top Indian intelligence chief in Kashmir, Rajinder Singh Bhullar, shuffled his documents and statistics with care as he laid out India's charge that Pakistan has done nothing so far to curb "cross-border terrorism".

Seated in his office in a heavily fortified barracks of the Border Security Force (BSF) in the Indian Kashmir summer capital Srinagar, Bhullar argued that Islamabad has yet to cut off military support to armed militant groups, despite the pledges of President Pervez Musharraf.

Pakistan's ISI intelligence service "has not acted as they are supposed to," said Bhullar.

"There is no change at this juncture... there is nothing visible of this nature," said the jovial, 56-year-old Sikh, whose full title is BSF

deputy inspector general in charge of intelligence in Kashmir.

Bhullar readily confirmed reports that the number of militant attacks has declined in the past six months.

But he insisted that it is due to the "constant pressure" of Indian security forces, and not the result of measures announced by Musharraf against extremist groups in a landmark speech on January 12.

"Since September, we are dominating. They (militants) are on the run," Bhullar said, brandishing a sheaf of statistics.

The figures showed the number of incidents related to the separatist militancy steadily dropped from 107 in September, to 87 in October, 70 in November, 63 in December, 57 in January and 34 in the first half of February.

"The decrease is because of our pressure and is not yet connected to Musharraf," Bhullar said.

"When the passes open in mid-April, then we will come to know," he added, referring to the snow-clogged Himalayan heights separating Indian- and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. "The real test will come in May and June."

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes ruled out Tuesday any immediate reduction in the number of troops massed in a tense military face-off on the border with Pakistan.

"We laid down certain conditions. These conditions have not been met, so the forces will remain there until a final decision is taken."

India has called on Pakistan to curb all militant infiltration across the Line of Control -- the de facto border dividing Kashmir between the two nuclear rivals -- and demanded the extradition of 20 criminals and alleged terrorists it says are sheltering in Pakistan.

# Mugabe slides into isolation

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe was Wednesday looking increasingly isolated after the United States said it planned to join the European Union and slap sanctions on his government.

The US State Department said late Tuesday that it planned to impose a travel ban on Mugabe and his entourage and was considering other measures to protest intimidation and violence leading up to the March 9-10 elections.

The EU imposed sanctions Monday, including a freeze on the overseas assets of Mugabe and 19 top officials, and a travel ban to the 15-nation bloc.

EU foreign ministers also withdrew their remaining election observers from Zimbabwe, after the Swedish head of the delegation, Pierre Schori, was expelled Saturday.

"We've been concerned about the political intimidation, the intimidation of the media, continuing political violence of a general nature and now with these additional steps that they've taken to deny access to foreign observers, I think the prospects continue to go down," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

The US sanctions are expected to be imposed in the next day or two, after President George W. Bush gives final approval.

Mugabe, who faces the toughest ever challenge to his 22-year grip on power in the elections from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, however, still enjoys support

from his African comrades.

The continent's two giant nations -- South Africa and Nigeria -- have thrown their weight behind Mugabe, criticising the sanctions moves by the European Union and the United States.

An opinion poll published here Wednesday showed Tsvangirai could beat Mugabe in next month's polls.

Around 20 percent of 1,693 Zimbabwean voters polled by the Mass Public Opinion Institute, led by a University of Zimbabwe political scientist, Masipula Sithole, said they would vote for former labour leader Tsvangirai, while just over 11 percent said they favoured Mugabe.

Nearly 60 percent of those polled refused to disclose their choice, saying their vote was secret.

David Cowan, an Africa expert for the Economist Intelligence Unit, a British think-tank, said the EU sanctions, signalled well in advance, "probably hurt Mugabe's personal pride more than anything else."

The measures would make Mugabe "feel ostracised by the international community, and that's not something he is looking forward to at all," said John Makumbe, president of the Zimbabwe branch of Transparency International, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to curbing corruption.

"It humiliates him. He will not like that. It will impact negatively on his ego," Makumbe said.

According to the British press, the EU sanctions will also cramp Mugabe's lifestyle.

# 'Al-Qaida preparing for fresh strike'

AFP, London

The al-Qaida terrorist network, widely accused of causing the September 11 atrocities in the United States, is far from destroyed and is preparing a new phase of activity, Western intelligence officials warned in interviews with the Financial Times Wednesday.

"Al-Qaida is not destroyed. It's still a very serious threat and it is already making efforts to regroup," a US official told the business daily.

"There are individuals reaching out, trying to assess the situation. They are not going to surrender," he warned.

Frank Spicka, head of terrorism at Interpol, the global police network, added: "Even if (alleged al-Qaeda leader Osama) bin Laden were killed, this is an organisation that can carry on. The head might be cut off but the body is already too extensive to die with."

"There is growing evidence that many individuals were evacuated from Afghanistan before the (US)

military offensive. It's safe to assume that many of them have entrenched themselves elsewhere in the world," he said.

Guillaume Dasquie, a French anti-terrorist expert and editor of Intelligence Online, told the paper: "Many of the arrests since September 11 were the result of old work on people monitored over years. But there is now a network being reconstructed in Europe... more secretive, more radicalised and with a greater capacity for violence."

A Western intelligence source added: "One of (the) biggest is the threat from unidentified sleepers placed prior to September 11. If you consider that the attacks of September 11 were years in the planning and months in their preparation, it is quite possible that another terrorist operation could be in the pipeline -- and the endgame could be as early as tomorrow."

# 40 killed in Nepali bus crash

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 40 people were killed and seven injured in a night bus accident in western Nepal, police said Wednesday.

The accident happened late Tuesday when the bus plunged 100 metres (328 feet) down into a stream while crossing a bridge at Chandibhanjyang in Mugling, 90 km west of the capital.

"So far the bodies of 26 victims have been fished out of the icy waters while 22 of them have been identified," police said.

The condition of one child among the injured was said to be serious.

Police said the cause of the accident was not yet known and rescue and search efforts were continuing.

# US troops fan out across rebel areas in Philippines

AFP, Isabela

US Special Forces troops fanned out across a southern Philippine stronghold of Muslim Abu Sayyaf guerrillas a day after clashes that left two Filipino soldiers wounded.

"This is a building process," said Lieutenant Colonel David Maxwell, head of the US contingent in Basilan island as four helicopters ferried US troops from their main base in Zamboanga city for joint operations against the Abu Sayyaf, linked to the al-Qaeda terror network.

About 80 US Special Forces commandos are already in southern Basilan, a jungle-clad volcanic island where the Abu Sayyaf are holding hostage a US couple and a Filipino nurse, officials said. Eighty others are expected to arrive in the next two days.

The latest batch of US troops were ferried to Basilan by huge US MH-47 Chinook helicopters in total darkness overnight, using only night-vision devices.

American servicemen unloaded

their supplies at a rustic base inside a rubber plantation while their superiors conferred with Philippine officers.

The Green Berets have already begun deploying in various military posts in the island, with some staying at the army's infantry brigade and the others billeted with hardened Filipino Marine troops in Maluso town, some 30 kilometres (18 miles) from Basilan's capital of Isabela.

Colonel Renato Miranda, commander of the 2nd Marine brigade, said about 18 US soldiers were welcomed with the camp staple of rice, sardines, fish and beef before they were escorted to visit a jungle outpost accessible only by military trucks passing through unpaved roads and muddy river beds.

"They are familiarising themselves and assessing the situation in the area where they are deployed," Miranda said.

# India plans huge hike in defence spending

AFP, New Delhi

India is likely to hike defence spending by 25-30 percent in its annual budget next week, as the country's armed forces remain poised for war with arch-rival Pakistan, a report said Wednesday.

"The government is set to increase the defence expenditure by a whopping 25-30 percent," a report in The Economic Times newspaper said, citing unidentified sources.

"This will take the figure up from the current 620 billion rupees (13 billion dollars) to 780-810 billion rupees during 2002-2003," the

report said.

The sources said the decision was recently taken at a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee along with Defence Minister George Fernandes and Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha.

The report said the demand for the sharp increase had come from Fernandes.

On average, the defence budget has been increased by around 15 percent annually over the last few years.

India and Pakistan came to the brink of war in December following an armed attack on India's parlia-

ment which New Delhi blamed on militant groups based in Pakistan.

An estimated 800,000 troops remain locked in a tense face-off across the Indo-Pakistan border and India has made it clear it has no plans for any immediate de-escalation, despite pressure from the international community.

"This government will ensure that the defence forces will never starve for money," Fernandes told a press conference on Tuesday.

"Whatever you need, you will get. The country can rest assured that there will be no starvation of money for the armed forces."

# Milosevic scores courtroom victory

AFP, The Hague

Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic on Wednesday scored his first point in his war crimes trial by succeeding in having the prosecution's second witness thrown out.

Kevin Curtis, the UN tribunal's chief investigator for Kosovo, was due to provide a summary of the prosecution's case against Milosevic, accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

But the one-time Serbian strongman objected that the testimony would amount to a repetition by someone else of the same arguments already advanced by the prosecution in its opening statements at the court in The Hague.

"We will probably go down to the prosecution's driver and the hairdresser," said Milosevic.

Presiding Judge Richard May, a Briton, said that on this point "we are with you Mr. Milosevic," and he proceeded to exclude the testimony.

May explained that Curtis would have presented a summary and conclusions based on statements given to him by witnesses to events at which he was not present.

# Massive hunt for Maoists

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal deployed "a massive number of troops" yesterday as the king appealed for unity in the Himalayan nation after weekend violence left 154 people dead.

Maoist guerrillas, who are fighting to overthrow the constitutional monarchy and install a "people's republic," attacked government installations on the weekend, killing mainly soldiers and police.

"We've deployed a massive number of troops," said Defence Secretary Padam Kumar Acharya, but declined to give numbers. He said soldiers had encircled Mangalsen, a west Nepali village

where 110 people died in the raids. The slaughter shocked the Hindu kingdom.

"People are still stunned and terrified to venture out," Chakra Bahadur Rawal, who runs a telephone booth at Bailpata, near Mangalsen, told Reuters.

Narendra Shah, a student in the nearby village of Chorpati said, "There's a sense of fear and uncertainty. We can't sleep at night."

Meanwhile, King Gyanendra appealed for unity as Nepal marked national democracy day. The king, who ordered the army into action against the rebels last November, said failure to unify would worsen the situation.

Nepal was going through a "vulnerable stage," said Gyanendra, vaulted to the throne last June by a bloody palace massacre in which most of the royal family were slain by a drunken crown prince who later killed himself.

"We are confident our countrymen will be able to... unite in overcoming the hardship facing our nation," King Gyanendra said in a traditional message marking the national holiday.

But "during this vulnerable stage, shortcoming in the political and administrative sectors could lead to the further deterioration in the situation," he added.

# Bush treads the same track 30 years after Nixon

AP, Beijing

On a chilly February day, the American president arrived at a Beijing airport hung with banners denouncing imperialism.

It was 1972, and Richard Nixon was looking for official ties with communist China after decades of hostility. A thaw began, and a former congressman named George Bush came as US envoy. His son, George W, visited Beijing on vacation.

On Thursday, 30 years to the day after Nixon's arrival on Feb 21, 1972, George W Bush returns to Beijing as president, landing at an airport where advertising for Western mobile phones and

designer clothes have replaced revolutionary slogans.

On the eve of the Bush visit, Chinese state media are playing up the anniversary of the Nixon visit, a turning point that has led to wide-ranging business, political and personal ties.

It's part of a Chinese air of welcome for Bush, temporarily setting aside rancor over human rights and other disputes.

State newspapers are reprinting photos of Nixon meeting communist founder Mao Tse-tung and exchanging toasts with Premier Zhou Enlai. The official Xinhua News Agency has run reminiscences by surviving participants in

their 70s and 80s.

Nixon began reaching out to China in 1971, hoping for an alliance against their mutual Soviet enemy and help in ending the Vietnam War.

American table tennis players had visited Beijing that year, in what reporters dubbed "ping pong diplomacy." Its success apparently encouraged Beijing to pursue contacts.

No US official had openly set foot on the mainland since the 1949 revolution. The separation had been deepened by the Korean War, when the two governments fought on opposing sides. Washington recognized the Nationalist dictatorship of Taiwan as China's government.

# France, India inch towards inking submarine deal

AFP, New Delhi

France and India are at a crucial stage in their negotiations over the sale of six French-built Scorpene submarines, officials said here on Wednesday.

The two sides are currently discussing costs and possible technology transfers by the manufacturers of the Scorpene for the Indian Navy, which is looking beyond its traditional arms supplier Russia for SSK class submarines.

The Scorpene is jointly built by DCN of France and Izar of Spain and each of the submarines are expected to cost around 15 billion rupees (320 million dollars).

"We are expecting some tangible

results by the end of March and maybe then a formal agreement can be signed," a highly-placed Indian naval source told AFP.

India and the French-led consortium began negotiations for the Scorpene package some two years ago with New Delhi insisting on technology transfers to build four of the six submarines here.

"The costs and the package are still on the negotiating table but we are quite confident of a quick result," the source said.

India was reportedly unhappy with DCN for the outright sale of one Augusta submarine to rival Pakistan and the transfer of technology for two more such vessels.



Indian soldiers ride in a truck in Senapati some 60 km north of Imphal on Wednesday. Security has been beefed up as security agencies fear clashes among scores of separatists in India's northeastern state of Manipur ahead of the final phase of provincial elections which are to begin on Thursday.

# Police fear gang war in Manipur ahead of polls

AFP, Guwahati

Security agencies fear clashes among scores of separatists in India's northeastern state of Manipur, ahead of the final phase of provincial elections, officials said Wednesday.

"We are worried about the various underground groups, who are supporting one candidate or the other in the elections, clashing with rival outfits," Manipur police chief A.A. Siddiqui told AFP by telephone from the provincial capital Imphal.

Polling for 20 constituencies, spread in the remote hill districts of Manipur, begins Thursday. The first phase for the 40 Assembly seats was completed February 14.

"In certain pockets of Churhandpur and Chandel districts militant groups are backing candidates directly and so there could be some violence on polling day," the police chief said.

Meanwhile, at least 30,000 army, police, and paramilitary troopers have taken positions across the 20 constituencies to prevent poll violence.

"Some areas are so remote and inaccessible that troop deployment has become a real challenge and the underground groups might try and take advantage of the situation," Siddiqui added, but said he expects the polls to pass off peacefully excepting in some sensitive areas.