

Mugabe thumbs nose at West, vows land reforms

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's re-elected President Robert Mugabe took the oath of office Sunday, vowing to accelerate land reforms while exulting that the Zimbabwean people had triumphed over British neo-colonialism.

In a speech mixing jubilant exhortations with defiant jabs at the West, which has widely rejected the legitimacy of last week's election, Mugabe also called for national unity and pledged to speed up land redistribution.

"We have dealt a stunning blow to imperialism," the 78-year-old leader said at the swearing-in ceremony here.

By exercising "our sovereign right to determine our destiny," the Zimbabwean people had said "loudly to those in Europe, no, no, never, never again shall Zimbabwe be a colony," the liberation war hero said.

He accused former colonial power Britain, as he had throughout the acrimonious, violence-wracked campaign, of having sponsored his opponent, former labour leader Morgan Tsvangirai, in the March 9-11 election.

The former union leader had been tipped to win in a free and fair election, but the polling was preceded by weeks of political violence, and the vote itself was marred by widespread irregularities documented by observers.

Immediately after Mugabe was declared the winner, Tsvangirai, 50,

rejected the outcome, charging massive fraud.

His stance was backed by Britain, the European Union, the United States, local Zimbabwean observers, and -- crucially -- the Commonwealth observer team, which issued a categorical condemnation of the polls.

African countries, as well as the Organisation of African Union and the Southern African Development Community, have on the whole given the vote a clean bill of health, with few reservations.

Mugabe on Sunday thanked his African supporters -- who also rallied around him when a heated Commonwealth summit early this month deferred a decision on Zimbabwe -- and dismissed the broad Western verdict that the election was irrevocably flawed.

"It's only free and fair when we, ... we who count much more than you, say that we have won," Mugabe said.

He added: "In 1980 as we in Zimbabwe celebrated the advent of our independence, never did we imagine that we would once again have to wage another struggle, a fierce struggle" against neo-colonialism.

Central to that struggle has been land reform, which grabbed international headlines in early 2000 when Mugabe's supporters began invading white-owned farms with his blessing and the collusion of the police.

NZ diplomat murdered in Solomons

AFP, Auckland

A New Zealand diplomat was stabbed to death on the streets of the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara Sunday, with New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clark describing the incident as "very, very tragic."

Bridget Nichols, who had served as deputy high commissioner for just a few months, was apparently stabbed with a kitchen knife but the motive remained unclear.

"We just don't know, it is a mystery... we don't know what's behind this and we are being a little bit cautious," Clark said.

New Zealand's foreign ministry gave few details, but confirmed the murdered diplomat's next of kin live in Britain.

"We have just heard and are a bit shocked. We know very little about the circumstances," a ministry spokeswoman said, adding Nichols' next of kin had been informed.



Pakistani paramedical staff attend to an injured diplomat at a hospital in Islamabad while an unidentified US security official (R) takes away a sack containing evidence and other articles from the site of a grenade attack inside a church located in the diplomatic enclave of Islamabad on Sunday. Five people were killed, including the wife and daughter of a US diplomat, and 45 others injured in the attack.

EU asks Israel to quit Palestinian territory

Tel Aviv ready for conditional pullback: Peres

REUTERS, Barcelona

European Union leaders urged Israel on Saturday to pull all its forces out of the Palestinian territories immediately and to respect international law, including Palestinians' human rights.

In a declaration issued at the end of a two-day summit in Barcelona, the leaders also reaffirmed their support for an independent Palestinian state alongside an Israel secure within internationally recognized borders.

"Israel, notwithstanding its right to fight terrorism, must immediately withdraw its military forces from areas placed under the control of the Palestinian Authority, stop extrajudicial executions, lift the closures and restrictions, freeze settlements and respect international law," they said.

"Both parties must respect international human rights standards," they added.

The declaration also called on the Palestinians to crack down on terrorism. But it added that Israel must not undermine the Palestinian security forces needed to curb militant groups.

Unlike earlier drafts seen at the summit, the final text did not include a call for Israel to respect the fourth Geneva convention, which protects the rights of refugees.

Israeli security forces have stormed into Palestinian refugee camps hunting for guerrillas they suspect have plotted attacks on Israeli civilian and military targets.

Germany, which traditionally opposes strong criticism of Israel, insisted that the line be dropped, EU diplomats said.

The EU leaders expressed strong support for U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni's mission to the Middle East which is aimed at brokering a cease-fire after 17 months of fighting.

On Saturday, Zinni held talks

'US to oust Saddam before next Sept 11'

Baghdad hurls insults at Cheney

AFP, Dubai

The United States will force the removal of President Saddam Hussein before next September 11, Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani said in an interview published Sunday.

"The American administration is determined to change the regime in Iraq, as officials we meet in Washington tell us," the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) told the Arabic newspaper Al-Hayat.

"I believe that any change must come before the first anniversary of the dramatic events" of last September 11 when suicide hijackers ploughed civilian airliners into New York and Washington.

"I also believe that the conflict between Washington and Baghdad is far deeper than the return to Iraq of (UN weapons) inspectors," Talabani added.

"I believe that Baghdad's agreement for a return of inspectors could delay (a military operation) or reduce the scale of the hostility to the Iraqi regime, but changing this

regime is an American law that any American administration has to apply."

"There is in the United States a law called Iraq liberation law passed by former president Bill Clinton and the new administration is determined" to implement it, he said.

Talabani went on to suggest three scenarios to remove Saddam: a military putsch, intensive aerial bombing following by army officers seizing power, or an invasion followed by US collaboration with the Iraqi opposition.

Meanwhile, Iraq's official media launched a tirade of insults Sunday at US Vice President Dick Cheney, branding him a "liar" and "sick" as he consults Gulf Arab leaders about possible military strikes against Baghdad.

"The allegations of Cheney and his Zionist clique, according to which the world and American interests are threatened by weapons of mass destruction are an American-Zionist heresy," said the ruling Baath party newspaper Ath-Thawra.

Blunkett warns Blair of riots in UK over Iraq attack

AFP, London

British Home Secretary David Blunkett warned Prime Minister Tony Blair that military action in Iraq could provoke serious civil unrest in Britain, the Sunday Telegraph said.

"We cannot separate Iraq from the Middle East or we will have major disturbances both internationally and in Britain," Blunkett said, according to an unnamed senior minister quoted by the paper.

His reported comments came amid growing disquiet among British ministers and European Union leaders at Blair's support for the US stance against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Muslim leaders backed the suggestion that tensions raised by ongoing violence in the Middle East could lead to rioting in the event of a British attack on Iraq, the paper added.

"Muslim youth were angry and frustrated at the action in Afghanistan. That frustration may lead to further incidents if there is action in Iraq," said Ahtsham Ali, an author of a government report into last year's race riots in Bradford,

northern England.

European Commission President Romano Prodi indicated the EU might oppose any eventual US attack on Iraq while stressing it was not being discussed at the weekend's EU summit in Barcelona.

Interviewed by BBC radio on the EU stance's on Iraq, Prodi said from Barcelona: "My position is one of deep worry about a possible attack on Iraq because of the potential expansion of the conflict. It is a very delicate area," he added.

Reuters adds: Senior British military officials have warned the government not to rush to commit troops to any US-led attack on Iraq, the Observer newspaper reported on Sunday.

The sources are reported to be concerned about the risk of Britain's armed forces being sucked into "a perilous open-ended commitment in Iraq".

The Observer said the United States had asked for up to 25,000 British troops to form part of an Iraqi invasion force if Washington acts against the country and its leader.

The officials said Arab countries



Saudi King Fahd (R) meets with US Vice President Dick Cheney (R) in Jeddah on Saturday. Cheney took his Middle East tour to the United Arab Emirates and top ally Saudi Arabia but found no support for new US strikes on Iraq while hearing protests about Israel's attacks on Palestinians.

Nepal seeks Indian help to fight Maoists

61 rebels killed in offensive

AFP, Kathmandu

A visit by Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to India next week is aimed at ironing out any problems between the two neighbours, but will also focus on Nepal's fight against a Maoist insurgency, politicians and analysts said Sunday.

During his five-day visit beginning Wednesday Deuba will meet with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and other leaders.

In November Deuba declared a state of emergency to allow the army to fight the increasingly violent Maoist rebellion, after the rebels pulled out of peace talks.

At the time India said it supported the action and would offer Nepal

"whatever assistance is required."

Shortly afterwards India donated two helicopters and arms for the Royal Nepalese Army.

Nepal's home minister last week said he was now seeking two more helicopters and another batch of weapons from India.

Meanwhile, More than 61 Maoist rebels were killed and hundreds injured on Sunday in a clash with security forces in far northwestern Nepal, officials said.

The army and armed police attacked a rebel training centre early Sunday at Kabara-Gunsal in Rolpa province, a Maoist stronghold where the rebels announce their 'people's war' in 1996.



Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) is greeted by a Hindu priest on Friday at the tiny islet of Nainativu near the northern peninsula of Jaffna during a historic visit to the war-ravaged region.

Ram temple construction to begin this year: Paramhans

Vajpayee dismisses VHP's claim on shila daan

PTI, Ayodhya

Ram Janambhoomi Nyas President Mahant Paramhans Ramchandra Das on Sunday said construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya would "start this year and was expected to be completed within next five years."

"I am satisfied with the peaceful conduct of the shila daan ceremony on March 15 last and my efforts to build a Ram temple would continue," the Mahant told PTI here.

He expressed hope that the government would hand over the acquired land to the Ram Janambhoomi Trust and claimed that there was no problem in doing so.

When asked what would he do if the land was not handed over to the trust, Paramhans said that he will take the land "by force".

"It is our property. We are not trying to grab the land of others. The land should be given to the Nyas," Paramhans said.

When asked whether he was satisfied with the efforts of the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to resolve the matter, he said the issue could be resolved amicably if the government made "sincere attempts".

However, Paramhans said he had no idea how Vajpayee would go about settling the matter given his "compulsions".

"The Prime Minister is already under pressure from

his allies on this issue," he said

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Saturday night dismissed VHP's claim that acceptance of shila daan in Ayodhya on Friday was recognition in principle of construction of Ram temple by the Government in the disputed site and said that the shrine construction could begin only if the Supreme Court verdict favoured it.

"We have made our position very clear on the issue. The issue of temple construction is pending before the court. If the verdict goes in favour of the Hindus, then temple construction will begin. Otherwise not," he said while replying to a debate in Lok Sabha on his statement on Ayodhya issue in the wake of the Supreme Court judgement.

The Prime Minister said that if the verdict in the original title suit went in favour of Muslims, then there was a provision to handle the matter.

Vajpayee clarified that he had not given any assurance to the VHP that temple construction would begin on a particular date in March.

What he had assured them was that some way would be found out by March this year, but it could not materialise.

Indo-Pak troops resume firing

Rocca in peace mission to defuse S Asian tension

REUTERS, Jammu

Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged heavy mortar and machinegun fire on Sunday, ending a month-long lull in border tensions in disputed Kashmir, Indian border security officials said.

"The lull was broken at seven in the morning (0130 GMT) when Pakistani troops resorted to unprovoked 82 mm mortar fire on Indian positions in the Samba sub sector," a senior Border Security Force (BSF) official told Reuters.

Indian border guards retaliated and a fierce gun battle was going on as scared villagers fled the area located near the southern end of Indian-administered Kashmir, he said. There was no information of casualties on either side.

The nuclear-capable neighbours have massed a million troops on their border after India blamed Pakistan-based Muslim rebels for a bloody attack on its parliament in December.

New Delhi has rejected calls to pull back its troops and resume peace talks with Islamabad, saying Pakistan should first end support to

anti-Indian militants. Pakistan denies the charges.

Meanwhile, United States Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca, will hold talks with senior Indian leaders starting on Monday, the latest in a spate of meetings between top officials of the two countries.

The visit comes amid a continued military face-off between nuclear-capable India and Pakistan who have massed about a million troops on their frontier after New Delhi blamed Pakistan-based Islamic rebels for a bloody attack on its Parliament in December.

Troops of the two countries exchanged heavy fire across their frontier in disputed Kashmir today after a month-long lull.

Rocca arrived in the Indian capital late on Saturday from Colombo as part of a South Asian tour that took her to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, US embassy spokesman Gordon Duguid told Reuters on Sunday.

"She has gone to (the northern Indian city of) Agra on Sunday to visit USAID funded projects there. She has government appointments

US steps up pressure on Tigers to pursue peace

AFP, Colombo

The United States has stepped up pressure on Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels to fall in line with a Norwegian-backed peace bid or face a major international crack-down, diplomats said here on Sunday.

The US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, Christina Rocca, ended a three-day visit to Sri Lanka Saturday saying that Washington was taking a higher profile in supporting Oslo's attempts to broker peace on the island.

The United States would reconsider its October 1997 designation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a foreign terrorist organisation only if the Tigers give up their key demand for an independent state, Rocca said.

She also reiterated that the Tigers must abandon terrorism and start respecting human rights for Washington to revise its stand on the guerrillas who have been fighting for a separate state called Eelam in the island's northeast.

Diplomatic sources here said Rocca's visit coupled with the high-

profile visit of a US Marine general, Timothy Ghormley, was a powerful signal of support to the peace process and a warning to the rebels.

Rocca became the first high-level US official to visit war-ravaged Jaffna peninsula on Friday, creating history by travelling in the first US aircraft to touch down there.

The visit came four days after the US embassy here warned Tiger rebels against violating a truce with the government and hinted that the international crackdown against terrorism could be extended to them.

The US embassy said the LTTE was engaging in activities that could jeopardise the open-ended Norwegian-brokered ceasefire which went into effect from February 23.

There were "credible reports" that Tigers were rearming themselves, had stepped up the recruitment of child soldiers and were extorting money from civilians, especially members of the minority Muslim community, the embassy said.

"In the current international context... in which terrorism is being

condemned in more and more countries, the LTTE should be especially vigilant about observing the terms of the ceasefire accord," its statement said.

The LTTE's London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, was quoted saying in a press report here today that Tiger supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran was concerned about allegations of truce violations.

"He is worried about allegations about anti-Muslim activity, child conscription, extortion and abduction and wants to take action if any LTTE member is found guilty," Balasingham was quoted saying in the Sunday Leader.

Balasingham said Prabhakaran has vowed "severe action" against any of his members violating the truce which was brokered by Norway ahead of possible face-to-face talks between the two sides.

He said the LTTE has also invited the international human rights watchdog Amnesty International to visit rebel-held areas of the island's northeast to investigate allegations of abuses.