

New Russia-NATO council 'historic step forward'

AFP, Moscow

The signing of the Rome Declaration giving Moscow a role in Atlantic alliance decision-making is a "historic step forward," the head of NATO's military committee said in Moscow yesterday as he prepared to inaugurate a military liaison mission.

The official's comments came on the eve of a summit of Russian and NATO heads of state in Rome where they are to create a new council that will enable the erstwhile Cold War foes to take common positions in a number of predefined areas.

"This is a historic step forward. The essential thing now is that we can now take together all the im-

portant decisions about Russia and NATO's security," Admiral Guido Venturoni said, as quoted by the ITAR-TASS news agency.

The opening of NATO's military liaison mission, coming five years to the day since the creation of the first Russia-NATO Permanent Joint Council (PJC), "shows that relations between Russia and NATO have developed successfully and become strong at different levels," he said.

Venturoni was due later to meet Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov.

Moscow however used the opportunity of Venturoni's visit to reaffirm its long-standing opposition to NATO's eastward expansion.

Feeble dialogue

FROM PAGE 1

Asked about the dialogue, Abdul Hamid ridiculed the government for inviting the opposition to negotiation while continuing political persecution of the opponents.

"Even lives of our MPs are not secure let alone those of the ordinary activists. Whom shall we take to the parliament if the lawmakers feel insecure?" he said, citing the armed attack on Nasim's motorcade in his own constituency.

The deputy opposition leader said Nasim was informed of the government's talks offer on her return home late last week. The AL would reach a decision on the matter after further discussions in the party, he said.

Not totally disheartened by the AL's ignoring its dialogue initiative, the BNP is learnt to have been planning for yet another move by the speaker of the Jatiya Sangsads,

Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar, who returned from Canada yesterday, may offer himself to mediate a government-opposition dialogue aimed at ending the opposition boycott of the parliament, BNP

sources said.

Chief Whip of the Opposition Abdus Shahid talking to The Daily Star yesterday said he also received an indication of a fresh dialogue from Deputy Speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui.

Besides, the BNP may also sent a written invitation to the AL as Sheikh Hasina recently made it clear that she was not happy with the informal offers so far made by the ruling party.

Meanwhile, sources at the AL said the opposition party has almost made up its mind to join the forthcoming parliament session at least for a day to avoid the danger of losing seats in the parliament due to a 90-day absence. "Whether the party would continue attending the House will entirely depend on how the treasury bench and the speaker behave," said an influential AL lawmaker, requesting anonymity.

He said the AL would like to raise all issues -- from the government's 'persecution of the opposition' to its misrule if it joins in the eighth parliament.

Musharraf

Pakistan rushes to increase uranium stockpile

AFP, London

Pakistani scientists have been working secretly round the clock for the past three years to accelerate production of weapons-grade uranium, Britain's The Times newspaper reported yesterday, quoting a leading Pakistani nuclear physicist.

This means Pakistan may have more nuclear warheads than previously believed, the paper suggested.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, professor of nuclear physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, said there were clear indications that the nuclear warheads were already in place on missiles.

"We are much closer to a nuclear confrontation with India than at any other time," he warned.

Hoodbhoy told The Times the scientists had been working in three shifts over the past three years.

For The Times, his disclosure raised the possibility that Pakistan could assemble more nuclear warheads than the estimated 30 to 50 it is generally thought to have.

Each warhead would have the same explosive power as the atomic bomb dropped over the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945.

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"I also want to tell the world and give the assurance that no infiltration is taking place across the Line of Control," he said.

"But I want to make one thing clear. Liberation movement is going on in occupied Kashmir and Pakistan cannot be held responsible for any action against Indian tyranny and repression."

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