

Russia tears up START II treaty

AFP, Moscow

Russia on Friday tore up the 1993 START II treaty, a nuclear arms reductions pact it said was made irrelevant by US missile defence plans. "Russia sees no conditions in which the START II (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) treaty can take effect and no longer feels bound under international law" to observe its terms, the foreign ministry said in a statement. The move comes a day after the official expiry of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty which was abrogated unilaterally by the United States last December.

'NATO summit to adopt anti-terror action plan'

AFP, Vienna

NATO will adopt a military action plan against terrorism and define more clearly its role in the global anti-terror war at a landmark summit in November, Alliance head George Robertson said Friday. "NATO's Prague summit in November is expected to endorse a military concept for defence against terrorism (and) to outline NATO's role in managing the consequences of terrorist attacks," among other things, he said. Speaking at a conference on terrorism in Vienna, he added that Prague will "affirm NATO's determination to act decisively against terrorism, including supporting - on a case-by-case basis - future international coalitions."

Drug helps prevent adult diabetes

AFP, Paris

A three-year international trial has concluded that a drug helps to delay the onset of adult diabetes and, for some people, reverses glucose intolerance -- the condition that precedes the disease. More than 1,400 patients with impaired tolerance to glucose were either given 100mg daily of the medication acarbose or a harmless lookalike, according to the trial, which is reported in next Saturday's Lancet.

Dying old woman raped in British hospital

AFP, London

A 71-year-old woman with terminal cancer was raped in a hospital toilet cubicle as she was receiving treatment for her condition, police in London said Friday. The woman, who according to the Sun newspaper has only months to live, was attacked at King's College Hospital in south London six weeks ago. She kept silent for three weeks before telling a doctor as she felt ashamed and did not want her family to know, the Sun said.

Death toll soars as China braces for more floods

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from flooding in northern China's Shaanxi province rose again Friday, with Premier Zhu Rongji urging rural areas in the Yangtze river basin to be on alert for "severe flooding" later this summer. In one of the hardest hit areas in Shaanxi's Ningshan county, 47 were confirmed dead as of Friday morning, up from an official death toll of 11 on Thursday, a local civil affairs official told AFP. "There are still 158 people missing," the official said.

Chirac poised to monopolise executive power

AFP, Paris

Jacques Chirac is poised to become one of the West's most powerful politicians if, as expected, his centre-right supporters win a comfortable majority in parliamentary elections on Sunday. Such a victory would be a solid mandate for the veteran right-winger, who would finally have an opportunity to wield real power after five years of "cohabitation" with a left-wing dominated parliament and government that reduced him to figurehead status. It would also be an endorsement following his hollow re-election victory in May presidential polls in which much of his 82 percent vote came from left-wing voters determined to keep far-right challenger Jean-Marie Le Pen out.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian warships, deployed off the coastline of Pakistan, return to the Mumbai harbour on Friday. About 20 Indian warships deployed off the coast of Pakistan have returned to Mumbai in a de-escalation of the six-month standoff between the nuclear-armed arch-rivals.

US under pressure to pick up pace of ME peace

AFP, Washington

The United States was under growing international pressure Friday to speed the Middle East peace process as a visibly conflicted Bush administration struggled to nail down its latest strategy. Washington's partners in the Group of Eight industrialized powers urged a timeline be set for concrete steps while a UN Security Council meeting produced calls for an international conference sooner rather than later.

The appeals came as US President George W. Bush completed a round of regional consultations aimed at setting a course on such issues as the timing and goals of a peace conference and creation of a Palestinian state. But with the while awaiting a comprehensive policy announcement from Bush, the administration appeared uncertain and divided on how to begin winding down the 20-month-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Thursday that Washington was mulling establishment of a provisional Palestinian state. Only 24 hours earlier he had played down the idea advanced by Secretary of State Colin Powell.

20 Indian warships deployed off Pak coast pulled back

Guns fall silent in Kashmir front

AFP, Mumbai

About 20 Indian warships deployed off the coast of Pakistan have returned to Bombay in a de-escalation of the six-month standoff between the nuclear-armed arch-rivals, officials said Friday. The warships include the country's sole aircraft carrier, the INS Viraat, destroyers, frigates and corvettes. "All the warships deployed in the north Arabian Sea for this particular mission have returned back to the base," defence spokesman Pranav Parashar said. The ships were deployed in early May after 35 people died in an attack by suspected Muslim rebels on a civilian bus and an Indian army camp in Kashmir. Orders for their withdrawal from the Arabian Sea were issued Monday. They will be docked in Bombay and engage in regular exercises, the spokesman said. "Of these, five warships belong to the eastern naval command and they would be here in Bombay till their replenishment. After that a decision would be taken as to when they can move to their base," Parashar added.

New Delhi also announced Monday it would lift a ban on Pakistani civilian aircraft flying over Indian territory, acknowledging that the infiltration of Muslim militants from the Pakistani zone of Kashmir had decreased. Meanwhile, cross-border shelling between Indian and Pakistani soldiers across the Kashmiri borders fell dramatically overnight, a police spokesman said Friday. "Artillery duels and mortar shelling along the Line of Control (LoC) and the international borders were down sharply," the spokesman said, adding, however, that in the southern Kathua district "some mortar shells were exchanged." He said there were no reports of any casualties. "Along the LoC late Thursday Indian and Pakistani troops traded artillery fire. The shelling took place in western Rajouri district, 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Jammu, he said. "But here also the intensity was less," he added. The LoC is a de facto border separating Indian and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, which has been claimed by both arch rivals and sparked two of the three wars between them.

Pakistan faces al-Qaida wrath

AFP, Islamabad

A suicide bomb attack against the US consulate in Karachi has highlighted the dangers Pakistan faces from al-Qaida and Taliban cells trying to disrupt support for the US-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan, analysts said Friday. The car bomb that blasted the diplomatic mission, killing eight and injuring dozens more including six consular staff, came a day after US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited Islamabad for talks with Pakistani leaders. It was the second attack of its kind after a May 8 suicide bombing that killed 14 people including 11 Frenchmen working on a joint submarine project with Pakistan. The blast, which Pakistani police believe was carried out by extremists linked with Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida terror network, jeopardised a strategic defence project on the construction of Agosta submarines. "The clear message is that we (al-Qaida and Taliban) are around, we are alive and we are capable of doing harm," said analyst Rasool Bakhsh Rais from the department of Political Science at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam university.

The gruesome incident comes as Pakistan grapples with a dangerous six-month border stand-off with India as conflict threatens to flare over the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir. Police intelligence sources said al-Qaida and Taliban fugitives from Afghanistan had appeared to weave an underground web in Pakistan with the support of local Islamic groups. "These groups are deeply angered by President (Pervez) Musharraf's resolve to help the international community fight against terrorism and to rid his own country of extremism and militancy," said one intelligence official. "They (al-Qaida and Taliban) have found it easier to regroup in Pakistan, taking full advantage of the pressure on Musharraf's government from India's war-like posture and massive concentration of troops in Kashmir and the Pakistani border," he said. "The entire security apparatus is strained in the face of these multiple threats." A senior police officer said the security agencies need to penetrate and break the network of terrorists.

Nepali troops battle Maoists: 52 rebel bodies recovered

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese troops and Maoist rebels clashed for a third day Friday in western Nepal in fierce fighting that may have cost more than 100 lives, officials said. An army official said the bodies of 52 Maoists had been recovered from the site of the clash in the insurgency-wracked Salyan district, some 280 kilometres west of Kathmandu. Cabinet sources put the Maoist toll at about 80, while local newspapers said more than 100 of the rebels were killed. State radio reported the deaths of five soldiers, although the respected Kathmandu Post said seven troops were killed and another 34 injured. It was impossible to verify the exact toll from the battle in the remote, mountainous district. An army official said the fighting started late Wednesday when some 1,000 Maoists ambushed an army patrol at Damachaur where the troops sat down for dinner. A defence ministry source said the fighting intensified Thursday when Maoists attacked one of the army's few helicopters. "The rebels shot at a military helicopter that had come with reinforcements, but the gunfire hit the chopper's tail and it managed to land safely with only minor damage," the source said. "The helicopter then fired bombs on the rebels, inflicting heavy casualties," he said. The army said it recovered arms and ammunition from the battle site and flew 28 wounded rebels to Kathmandu for treatment. In separate insurgency-linked violence, state radio said Thursday that at least 38 rebels had been killed in the past three days in other clashes around the kingdom.

Delhi warms to idea of electronic eyes at LoC

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government on Friday indicated it had warmed to an idea floated this week by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld of placing sensors in Kashmir to monitor insurgency by Pakistan-based militants. The question of placing the electronic devices along the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir, was discussed at a meeting here of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said. "There was a proposal about sensors to be placed on the LoC. That is a matter that will now be discussed between the defence ministry and the US government," Singh told reporters after the two-hour CCS meeting. The technical aspects had to be worked out in detail, he added. "How it is to be done, who does it, etc."

Delhi warms to idea of electronic eyes at LoC

Singh said there was no decision on the issue. "The decision is only to study this matter," he said. Rumsfeld offered Washington's help in deploying electronic ground sensors in disputed Kashmir when he visited New Delhi Wednesday on a mission aimed at cooling tensions between India and Pakistan. The issue of insurgency is at the core of the current dangerous military stand-off between the nuclear-armed neighbours, who between them have around one million troops massed on their common frontiers. The showdown was sparked by an attack on India's parliament complex in December which New Delhi blamed on two Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups battling Indian rule in Kashmir.



PHOTO: AFP

Rickshaw drivers push their vehicles through a flooded street in Guwahati, the capital of Assam state in northeast India on Friday. Continuous rains for the last three days have left the largest city in the northeast under water.



PHOTO: AFP

Protestors hold candles during vigil outside the Fairmont Hotel where the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is meeting on Thursday in Dallas, Texas. The protestors marched a mile through downtown Dallas carrying signs and banners and ended up outside the hotel where they will stay all night to protest sexual abuse in the Catholic church.

Karzai vows to push Afghans out of 'quagmire'

AFP, Kabul

Newly elected Afghan president Hamid Karzai vowed Friday he would work to improve the lives of his countrymen and push international donors to make good on aid pledges. "The objective is to take Afghanistan to a better life. The objective is to take Afghanistan out of this quagmire in which it was," he told a press conference a day after being elected head of state. "We should do everything to bring the Afghan people to dignity and the good life that they deserve," said Karzai, who referred to himself as president. The international community has pledged some five billion dollars to help reconstruct Afghanistan over the next five years. But Karzai, who was elected by a traditional assembly or Loya Jirga, said the amount of money received so far was "minimal in comparison to the aid promised". Karzai said while he wanted to thank the international community for their support so far he would now be pushing for "stronger, more effective, speedy delivery of help to Afghanistan". He also emphasised that the reconstruction of the nation's highways, which have been shattered over the

past 23 years of conflict, would be one of the main beneficiaries of the hoped-for flow of aid. And he pledged that "the war against warlordism will go on". The six-month interim administration that ran Afghanistan from December encountered limited success in its campaign against the country's powerful Kalashnikov-toting regional bosses. Karzai also said he would continue to back the presence of thousands of US-led coalition forces on Afghan soil who are hunting for al-Qaeda and Taliban troops. "In the interim administration I focused strongly on the campaign against terrorism. This fight will go on. This will remain one of the top priorities and it will go on until we are completely sure there's no danger to citizens... in any part of the world from terrorism." Karzai was speaking before he hosted a lunch of some of Afghanistan's most powerful political figures which was set to focus on the shape of his new government. Amongst those gathered at the presidential palace were Kandahar governor Gul Agha, Nangahar governor Haji Qadir, Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Karzai's chief adviser Ashraf Ghani.

Americans on path to Jihad

AFP, Washington

The Jihad, or "holy war," launched by Islamic extremists from abroad, is attracting an unlikely following among young, often marginalised Americans willing to fight against their own country, according to experts and published reports. The recent announcement of the arrest of Brooklyn-born Jose Padilla, 31, a former Roman Catholic who converted to Islam in prison, illustrates a wider point. Padilla, who changed his name to Abdullah al-Muhajir, is suspected of plotting to detonate a radioactive bomb in the United States apparently on the orders of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network. "They are potentially dozens of Padillas in the prison and the jail system," said Rick Ross, a New Jersey activist who works to save young Americans from cults, and militant groups. He says Muslim extremist groups have taken a cue from the American extreme right in recruiting

in prisons, offering literature and ideas that ferment in the empty hours in the minds of prisoners. According to US News and World Report, the recruitment drive has been going on for 20 years, well before Padilla, or the arrests in Afghanistan of so-called American Taliban John Walker Lindh, 21, and US-born Yasser Esam Hamdi, 22. "There is also an American road to jihad," the magazine said, revealing that in the 1990s between 1,000 and 2,000 US citizens left the country to join up to Jihad. Since 1989, some 400 recruits have left the United States and Canada to be trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan alone. This "road to Jihad" was partly opened, according to Ross, by Louis Farrakhan, the 'Nation of Islam' leader whose movement he says was particularly active in the conversion of prison inmates. Ross said that other more extreme organisations followed suit.

Solar system similar to ours

AFP, Washington

US astronomers announced Thursday the discovery of a solar system they say bears similarities to our own and includes three planets orbiting a sun 41 light years away. Astronomers said they have identified an extrasolar planet orbiting the star, named 55 Cancri, at about the same distance Jupiter orbits the sun. "Today we are announcing the discovery of a planet that for the first time resembles a planet in our solar system," Geoffrey Marcy, an astronomer professor at the University of California at Berkeley, told a NASA press conference here. "All other extrasolar planets discovered up to now orbit closer to the parent star, and most of them have had elongated, eccentric orbits. This new planet orbits as far from its star as our own Jupiter orbits the sun," Marcy said.

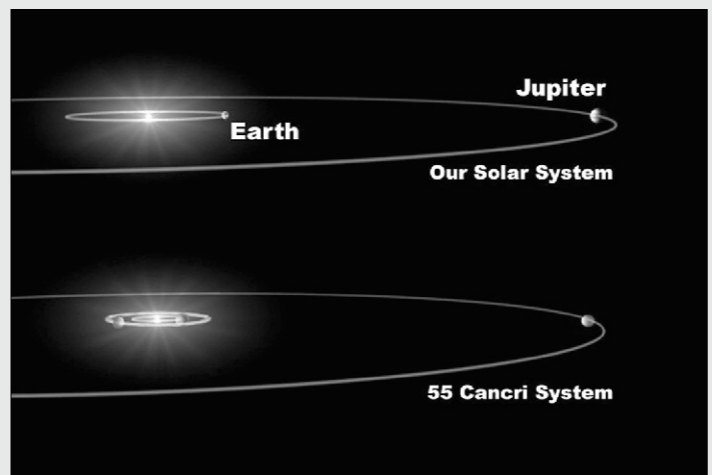


PHOTO: AFP

This graphic released on Thursday by NASA depicts a comparison of our solar system with a newfound planetary system called 55 Cancri. The new system has a Jupiter-mass planet in an orbit similar to the orbit of our Jupiter. In addition, two other planets are shown orbiting 55 Cancri at distances closer than the distance between Earth and our Sun.