

Asians oppose US strikes, urge Iraq to obey UN

AFP, Hong Kong

Asian governments have urged Saddam Hussein to comply with UN disarmament resolutions, but even staunch US allies in the region have openly questioned the merits of any US military action to topple the Iraqi dictator.

Permanent UN Security Council member China is among the most vocal and predictable opponents of a possible US military intervention, but fellow regional heavyweight and US ally Japan appears equally sceptical.

India, which has been forging ever closer ties with the Bush administration, is strongly against any attack on Iraq, as is Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation.

US President George W. Bush has repeatedly warned that Saddam's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction poses a threat to the United States and its allies.

And speculation is growing that Washington is prepared to launch a military campaign to get rid of Saddam, with or without the support of trusted friends.

While Saddam raised the stakes Thursday by warning the United States that any new war was doomed to failure, Bush has threatened to use "any means necessary" to bring about a "change of regime" in Baghdad.

Such sentiments have provoked growing unease in Asia.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi told a meeting of former premiers Thursday he believed Bush should exercise "self-restraint" over Iraq, Jiji and Kyodo news agencies reported.

China in turn has made clear its objections to expanding the US-led "war on terror" to Iraq and has welcomed Baghdad's invitation to the chief UN arms inspector for talks on resuming weapons inspections.

China wants difficulties over Iraq to be "properly resolved at an early date through political and diplomatic channels" on the basis of UN resolutions, foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan said this week.

"China regards Iraq's invitation as a positive step and welcomes it," Kong said.

Neighbouring India has urged Baghdad to comply with Security Council resolutions.

Stampede claims 3 in Tamil Nadu

PTI, Madurai

Three persons died in the stampede in the remote Sathuragiri Malai in this district where over two lakh people thronged to offer worship to Lord Mahalingam (Shiva) on the 'AdiAmavasya' day.

Police said the stampede occurred yesterday at three places along the narrow Upputhurai pathway.

ROK names newspaper chief as new PM

REUTERS, Seoul

President Kim Dae-jung named the head of South Korea's largest business newspaper as prime minister on Friday, the day after the opposition took control of parliament in a by-election landslide.

Kim tapped Chang Dae-whan, 50-year-old president of the Maeil Business Newspaper, following parliament's rejection last week of his previous nominee for the post, a theologian who would have been the country's first female premier.

The prime minister plays a largely ceremonial role, but would take over if the president died or was incapacitated.

On Thursday, voters delivered a rebuke to Kim's minority government, giving the opposition a triumph in by-elections seen as a litmus test for the December presidential race.

Landslides kill 47 in China

REUTERS, Beijing

Landslides caused by floods killed at least 47 people as violent rain storms pummelled China's southern province of Hunan this week, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

The toll could rise because mining was a key industry in part of the hard-hit area and many people were working underground at the time of the deluge, it said late on Thursday.

Seasonal floods have killed almost 900 people nationwide since May, including several trapped in coal mines by rising water.

Xinhua said the heaviest rain in years hit a rice growing area in Hunan, some 400 km (250 miles) north of Hong Kong, with a population of about 3.5 million.

It said the losses from the rains, which lashed the area from Tuesday to Thursday, were around 190 million yuan (\$23 million) and some 2.3 million tonnes of agricultural products were damaged.

India running out of time to pursue Kashmiris to vote

Delhi holds Kashmir autonomy talks

AFP, Srinagar

With just 20 days before nominations have to be filed for participation in the controversial vote in Indian Kashmir, the New Delhi government is running out of time to get separatists on board.

So far not one of the separatist groups has given hint that it will contest the legislative poll, to take place in four phases starting September 16.

And Abdul Ghani Bhat, the

chairman of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), the umbrella organisation linking the separatist groups, said Friday he does not believe anything will happen in the next three weeks to persuade separatists to take part in the poll.

"Our position is clear, we will not be taking part," Bhat told AFP.

"Our agenda is very different from that of the Indian government. Theirs is rooted in political power, ours is based on history and in trying to secure a comprehensive

solution to the Kashmir problem."

The only elections the APHC would contest, he added, would be those that followed comprehensive talks involving political groups in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, in the Indian zone and the New Delhi government.

"When elections are held on both sides of Kashmir as, then we will participate," Bhat said.

No talks were currently under way between the APHC and the Indian government nor is it likely any would have started by the time the nomination deadline rolls around on August 29.

"Maybe in November, when they've completed their irrelevant exercise (the elections), they may be ready to start talking," Bhat said.

New Delhi had been expecting this kind of response from Bhat and other hardliners, but had quietly behind the scenes been trying to lure moderate separatist leaders to break ranks.

Meanwhile, the Indian government and a representative from Indian-administered Kashmir held a second round of talks Friday on granting a autonomy to the insurgency-wracked region, government sources said.

The first round of talks on July 25 also took place in New Delhi between Arun Jaitley, a former Indian law minister and spokesman for the ruling BJP party, and Kashmir minister Ghulam Mohiuddin Selayed to ensure a free and fair poll, the Press Trust of India said.

Former law minister Ram Jethmalani, meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, pointed to the massacre Tuesday of nine Hindu pilgrims as a sign conditions were not right for voting, the news agency said.



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri top moderate separatist leader Shabir Shah (L) greets visiting European Union diplomat Michael Sternberg (R) ahead of their meeting in Srinagar on Thursday. Shah told visiting European Union diplomats that elections to the state assembly starting next month would not help resolve the half-century dispute over the Himalayan territory.

Palestinians seek timetable for statehood in talks with US

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon branded the Palestinian Authority a "gang of murderers" that must be rooted out as the Palestinians held their highest-level talks with U.S. officials in months.

Three Palestinian cabinet ministers met Secretary of State Colin Powell and White House national security adviser Condoleezza Rice on Thursday, pledging new efforts to end 22 months of Middle East violence.

But the two sides remained at odds over President Bush's call in June for Palestinians to replace President Yasser Arafat with a new

leadership. Palestinian ministers also sought a firm timetable to statehood.

I reaffirmed to ministers that the president is committed to doing everything possible to find a way forward," Powell said after talks at the State Department.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said he was assured during the talks that "the end game is specified with a Palestinian state. We really hope to see an action plan that will define the timeline" for independence.

The talks in Washington followed a renewed round of dialogue with Israeli officials, which also yielded no breakthroughs, on easing the army's grip on the occupied Gaza

Strip and parts of the West Bank on condition Palestinians cooperate on security to reduce violence in those areas.

The Palestinian ministers were also expected to meet Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet on security issues during the visit.

Bush called on Palestinians in June to choose a new leader in elections and introduce democratic reforms to the Palestinian Authority as a condition for moving toward peacemaking and statehood in the West Bank and Gaza.

Reiterating that call on Thursday, Sharon lashed out at the Palestinian Authority, whose security forces he

accuses of participating in attacks in the 22-month-old Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.

"Between us and the goal (of peace) stands the gang of murder, terror and corruption of the Palestinian Authority," Sharon said in a televised speech.

"The only way to peace demands this gang of murder be uprooted from its political positions," he said.

Erekat also warned against the growing humanitarian crisis for Palestinians since Israel occupied seven West Bank cities, choking off movement inside and between the urban centers, after a spate of suicide bombings in June.

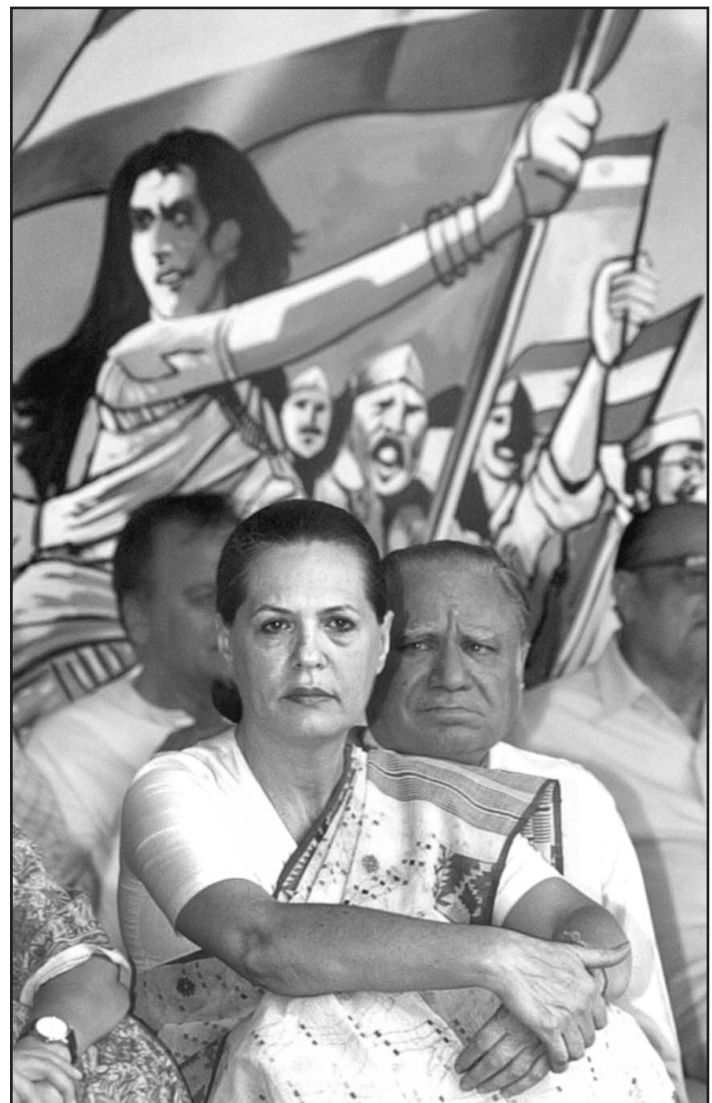


PHOTO: AFP

Congress President and India's main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (C) attends a meeting honouring the martyrs of Quit India Movement in New Delhi on Friday. In the Quit India Movement which began 60 years ago on August 9, Indians led by Mahatma Gandhi mounted non-violent protests for independence, some of which were violently repressed by British colonial authorities.

Twins recovering

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Twin Guatemalan girls who spent the first year of life joined at the top of the head have opened their eyes and shown other promising movement nearly three days after being surgically separated, doctors said on Thursday.

Maria de Jesus Quiej-Alvarez and her twin Maria Teresa remain in critical condition with stable vital signs after a grueling 22-hour operation to divide them ended Tuesday morning at Mattel Children's Hospital at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Earlier on Thursday, UCLA said just one twin, Maria de Jesus, had briefly fluttered her eyes after being taken off drugs that prevented the twins from injuring their brains by coughing or moving in the very early stages of recovery.

Both have opened their eyes and moved a little bit," Dr. Andy Madikians, the twins' attending intensive care physician, told reporters.

He said that Maria Teresa, who underwent a second procedure on Tuesday after suffering a blood clot on the brain, is responding less than Maria de Jesus, who looks around and can move her arms and legs, but that was to be expected.

"We are still very optimistic, cautiously of course. Things are moving the way we hoped," Madikians said.

In the days ahead, the UCLA medical team will be looking for "more movement, more eye opening and more responsiveness," he said, adding that it is still too early to say when the girls will be removed from respirators.

White farmers in Zimbabwe stay put as deadline expires

AFP, Harare

Most white farmers in Zimbabwe remained on their properties Friday as a deadline set by the government of President Robert Mugabe ordering them off their land expired.

On May 10 the government rushed through a law forcing all farmers served an acquisition notice, to stop farming operations by June 24 and to physically vacate their farm by August 9.

But farming leaders said the majority of the farmers were still on their farms because they had nowhere else to go.

Some had individually appealed to the government to be allowed to continue farming, but were still awaiting the response.

"What I am worried about is that there is blanket order (for the police) to go and pick up farmers," said Colin Cloete, head of the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU).

"What we have heard is that police are gearing up to try and pick up some people, but farmers are not trying to be confrontational with government," Cloete told AFP.

Cloete said he had urged CFU members, 70 percent of them affected by the Thursday midnight

deadline, not to resist if police came for them, but to cooperate.

Without getting into details, police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena said there were certain mechanisms to be followed to enforce the law, "but the law is very clear that eviction starts today."

He would not give details of what form the evictions would take, but added that "we are certainly aware of our responsibility".

Farmers anticipate that they will be apprehended by the police, asked to make statements, have charges laid against them, taken to court and then served with eviction orders.

FARC sets conditions for peace talks with Uribe

AFP, Bogota

Colombia's FARC guerrillas released conditions Thursday for opening peace talks with new Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, the day after he was sworn amid mortar attacks on the presidential palace.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) posted an internet statement, reiterating the conditions it imposed on May 15, before Uribe was elected, to enter into dialogue with the new government.

The FARC's principle demand, likely to be unacceptable to the

government, is the state's withdrawal from the southern departments of Cauca and Putumayo, a move which would give the FARC de facto control of 117,000 square kilometer (45,160 square mile) swathe of territory.

The rebels also demand that all reference to them as terrorists be dropped and that the state adopt to policy to disband the paramilitary United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), their arch enemies.

Under a similar deal, former president Andres Pastrana demilitarised five municipalities in southern Colombia in 1998 in return for the rebels agreement to peace talks.



PHOTO: AFP

Balloonists take a close look at a quarry shortly after taking to the skies from the Bristol International Balloon Fiesta being held at Ashton Court, Bristol on Friday. The Fiesta, which is free and ranked as one of the six top outdoor events in the UK, continues until Sunday and is expected to attract half a million visitors. More than 100 hot air balloons will lift every morning at 6am and evening at 6pm.

Many disaster deaths preventable: UN

REUTERS, Geneva

Natural disasters ranging from earthquakes to cyclones kill some 90,000 people a year but many lives could be saved with better precautions, the United Nations said Friday.

Early warning systems and better planning of land use could mitigate both human and economic losses from such hazards, which take the hardest toll on poor countries, it said in a report.

The United Nations hopes the report,

"Living with Risk - A Global Review of Disaster Reduction Initiatives," will be endorsed by the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which it will host in Johannesburg, South Africa, later this month, and become a blueprint for disaster planning and risk reduction.

"There is nothing inevitable about death in an earthquake," said Kenzo Oshima, U.N. undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs. "Earthquakes don't kill people, unsafe buildings kill them."