

US spl envoy holds talk with DPRK leaders

AFP, Seoul

US special envoy James Kelly was Friday to hold talks with senior North Korean officials in hopes of reopening dialogue with the Stalinist state, officials here said.

"Thursday's meeting was nothing more than a preliminary contact," an official of the South Korean foreign ministry said after Kelly met with Kim Gye-Gwan, one of several vice foreign ministers in Pyongyang. "In today's main talks, North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok-Ju, who is higher than Kim Gye-Gwan in ranking, is likely to attend," said the official who wished to remain anonymous.

After arriving in Pyongyang on Thursday, Kelly met with Kim Gye-Gwan to outline the Bush administration's policy to the North and presented what the US side wants to discuss in future talks, he said.

On taking office early last year, President George W. Bush adopted a hard-line policy towards the North, which he included in his "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

A crew member runs in front of an E-2C Hawkeye aircraft after it landed on Friday on board the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, which is sailing in the calm north Arabian sea before entering the Gulf waters. US lawmakers moved on Thursday toward giving President George W. Bush the authority he had sought to use "necessary and appropriate" force against Baghdad. The House of Representatives International Relations Committee began work on the final wording of a resolution while senators voted 95-1 to open preliminary debate on the proposal.

Iraq debate gathers steam in US Congress

Lawmakers make first step toward authorising force

AFP, Washington

The US Congress was set Friday to step up debate on Iraq after the House of Representatives moved closer to granting President Bush authorisation to use military force against Baghdad.

The House International Relations Committee voted 31-11 late Thursday to approve a resolution jointly crafted by the House leadership and the White House.

The resolution would authorise Bush to use the military "as he determines necessary and appropriate" to defend national security interests and enforce UN Security Council resolutions on Iraq. An aide for the Democratic leadership said the measure also required Bush to assure Congress that "diplomacy has been exhausted" and that "action against Iraq will not imperil the war on terrorism."

The Senate, the upper house of the US Congress, voted 95-1 to open preliminary debate on the proposal.

The votes came as Secretary of State Colin Powell consulted with Russia and other countries on the economic and political ramifications of ousting Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

But Baghdad threw down the gauntlet, with Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan challenging Washington to a duel between Saddam and Bush that the White House denounced as "irresponsible."

"Both groups should use the same weapons, a president against a president, a vice president against a vice president," Ramadan said. "If they are serious, this way we are saving the American and the Iraqi people."

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle appeared to dig in his heels for a protracted debate, calling for refinements to the resolution.

"I am still confident that at the end of the day we're going to be able to develop a broad, bipartisan consensus about this authorisation... but we're just starting," Daschle said.

"The resolution before us today is not only a

product of haste; it is also a product of presidential hubris," said Democratic Senator Robert Byrd, the lone dissenter in Thursday's Senate vote.

He called the resolution "an unprecedented and unfounded interpretation of the president's authority under the Constitution, not to mention the fact that it stands the charter of the United Nations on its head."

Republican Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott, however, put the onus on the world body and said the Senate should move forward.

Meanwhile, US lawmakers Thursday moved toward giving President George W. Bush the authority he seeks to use "necessary and appropriate" force against Baghdad.

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EU warns against Iraq war

AFP, Rethymno

Several EU defence ministers warned Friday against a US-led war against Iraq without UN backing, although splits clearly remained among the 15-member bloc.

German Defence Minister Peter Struck warned that any war against Iraq would have serious political and economic effects worldwide, but said he still hoped the US would soften its tone over Baghdad.

"As before there are differing views, especially between my country and the United States of America," he said, as he arrived for an informal meeting of EU defence ministers on the Greek Mediterranean island of Crete.

Belgian Defence Minister Andre Flahaut also warned against military action. "The Belgian government has always said there was no question of military action in Iraq outside a UN framework," he said.

Austrian Defence Minister Herbert Schreiner said: "We have to do all we can to avoid military action, because it would be very dangerous for other countries in the region."

Struck, whose government has been the most outspoken EU member against war, acknowledged that differences remain within the 15-member bloc.

"Everyone recognises the danger of the regime of Saddam Hussein, but there are differing

views over how we should react to it," he told reporters.

"We are of the view that the next step should be for inspectors to go in to assess Saddam's possibility of building weapons of mass destruction, while others are already set on military action."

"There are also such views among defence ministers here," he added, in an apparent reference to Britain. British Defence Minister Geoff Hoon was late arriving for the ministerial meeting.

"War would have serious political consequences... and would naturally produce worldwide economic effects, and would cost a lot of lives," he said.

Nepali king postpones election by a year

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra has accepted a request by the government to postpone parliamentary elections by a year, state-run radio announced Friday.

"At the recommendation of the prime minister, the king has accepted a postponement of the elections," the radio said.

The government had sent a letter to Gyanendra on Thursday saying the "deteriorating law-and-order situation" in the country required a delay in the vote which had been scheduled to take place between

November 13 and January 10.

Earlier, Nepal's King Gyanendra is holding consultations with political parties and constitutional experts on a request by the cabinet to postpone parliamentary elections for a year because of the country's violent Maoist insurgency, officials said Friday.

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5 killed in US shooting spree

REUTERS, Aspen Hill

Five people were shot to death in public in a normally sedate Washington suburb, picked out at random over several hours and each killed with a single bullet, police said on Thursday.

Two women and three men were killed in six separate shootings that began at 5:20 p.m. EDT on Wednesday and ended at 10 a.m. EDT on Thursday in Montgomery County, Maryland, north of Washington.

"It is something of a shooting spree," Montgomery County police spokesperson Nancy Nickerson said. "What the motivation is or reasoning is, we don't know."

There was no indication that any of the victims knew each other, but police said the crimes could be linked even though precious little information was available, a source said.

Police were unable to say where the killer took aim from or what type of weapon was used, but said the fact that only one round was fired in each killing pointed to a trained marksman.

"We do have someone that so far has been very accurate in what they are attempting to do," Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose told reporters at the scene of one shooting.

"We feel like we probably have a skilled shooter and that does heighten our concern," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi children holding paper hearts with lit cigarettes on them march in support of President Saddam Hussein (portrait behind) on Friday from Baghdad's Saddam Centre for Cardiac Surgery to the health ministry in the western part of the capital to mark this week's World Heart Day and also to show support for their leader ahead of the October 15 presidential referendum.

Ivorian rebels okay truce

AP, Bouake

Ivory Coast rebels agreed to a cease-fire Thursday in a steamroller offensive that has taken half the country in just over two weeks, West African mediators announced saying the way was now clear for peace talks.

"They have agreed to a cease-fire," negotiator Mohamed Ibn Chambas told journalists after foreign ministers of five West African nations flew into the heart of rebel-held territory to press for the cease-fire.

Speaking in the central city of Bouake, where the talks took place, he said a cease-fire deal would be signed in the nation's capital, Yamoussoukro, on Friday.

Chambas said he hoped the mediators would be able to discuss the rebels' grievances after the agreement was signed. It was not immediately clear how long the cease-fire would last, or what, if any, conditions were attached to the deal.

Ivory Coast has been plunged into crisis since a Sept. 19 uprising by disgruntled soldiers, who have since captured Bouake and the northern opposition stronghold of Korhogo, as well as most of the northern half of the country. Around 300 people died in the first days of the uprising the nation's deadliest ever.

Desperate to avert an all-out conflict, the top West African envoys came to Bouake to urge the rebels to lay down their arms.

President Laurent Gbagbo's government having already yielded the north of Ivory Coast to the rebels in just 15 days has made clear it is open to a cease-fire.

The peace mission, including foreign ministers from five nations, arrived in French army helicopters and were driven to a French school through quiet streets, which betrayed no signs of the conflict that has split the once-stable nation in two.

At the school, rebel leaders kept the foreign ministers waiting for an

hour before driving up in a convoy of pickup trucks. Bearded rebel Tuo Fozie climbed out, shook hands and saluted.

Talks began in a cluster of tiny pastel school chairs under the school's tin-roof pavilion.

The meeting itself provided mediators and the world at large a look at those claiming to direct Ivory Coast's shadowy rebels.

"This is the first contact by anybody really with the other side. So we are all a bit mystified as to who the other side is and what they are demanding," Chambas said before the talks.

Heavily armed French soldiers, part of a 1,000-strong force in the former French colony, stood on guard among the palm trees and flowers planted in the schoolyard. Outside the school, rebels, dressed in a mix of uniforms and T-shirts, manned a roadblock. A French military cargo plane flew the delegation to Yamoussoukro, the nation's capital and a base for the formidable French force.

EU nod for 10 states

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission will next week recommend that 10 ex-Soviet and Mediterranean countries join the 15-nation EU in 2004, but keep Turkey out for now, an official said Friday.

The European Union's executive arm will next Wednesday recommend the entry of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, the EU source said.

In its final appraisal reports on the candidate countries before a show-piece EU summit in December, the commission would also urge the 10 hopefuls to keep up the pace of reform to be in shape for EU membership in two years.

But Turkey's long-running bid to join the world's biggest trading bloc would stay on the backburner, partly out of human-rights concerns.

"It's not that we're saying 'no' to a date" for Turkey's accession negotiations to begin, the source said, declining to be named.

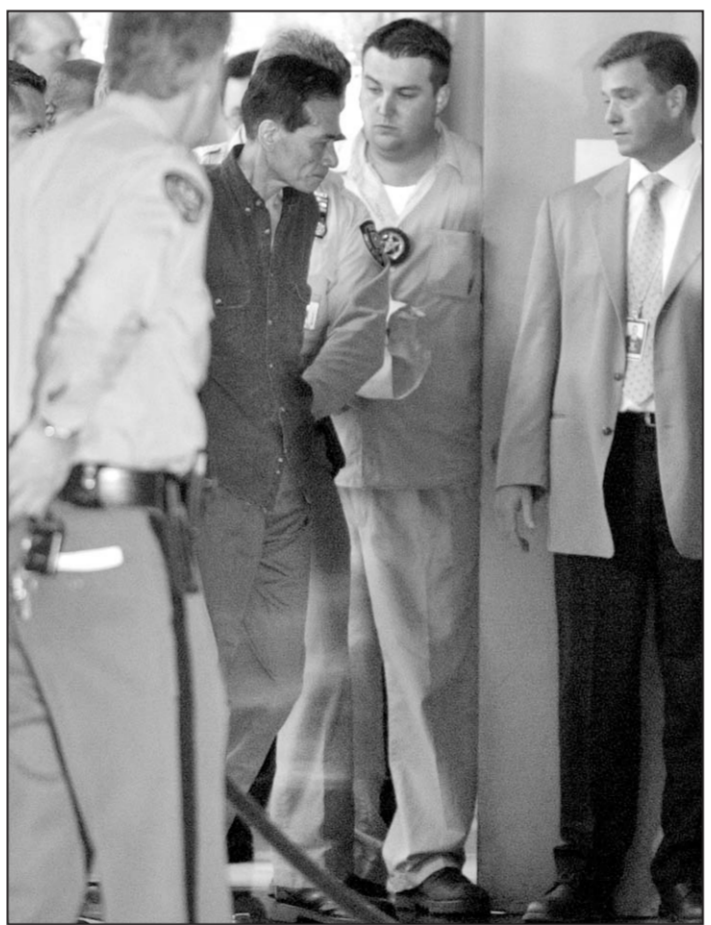


PHOTO: AFP

A suspect (2nd L) is being led through the United Nations by security officers after his arrest on Thursday in New York. UN security guards apprehended the man who fired a pistol at the United Nations headquarters, but said no one was injured.

'Sept 11 was 1st of 3 attacks al-Qaida had planned'

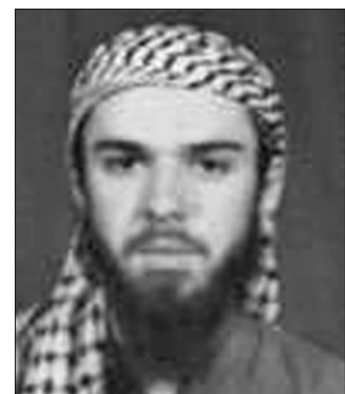
AP, Washington

John Walker Lindh and other al-Qaida and Taliban prisoners told US interrogators the September 11 hijackings were supposed to be the first of three increasingly severe attacks against Americans. Their claims have not been corroborated, government officials said.

Lindh will be sentenced on Friday, likely to 20 years in prison, for supplying services to the Taliban and carrying an explosive during commission of a felony. He heard some of the claims while serving in a 20-man Taliban infantry unit of Arabic speakers in Afghanistan, according to people familiar with his account.

Authorities have gathered similar information from prisoners of various levels of the terrorist network. But the officials said the United States hasn't found specific plans for two additional large-scale attacks and they suspect the claims could involve disinformation or folklore that circulated among low-level terrorists and Taliban soldiers after September 11.

"We have not been able to corroborate the claims among the thousands of pages of documents and other evidence we have gathered the last year," one senior law enforcement official said. "We



battlefield rumours about two waves of post-September 11 attacks.

Reading from his interview notes, Gunaratna said Lindh told him: "The original attack plan was in three phases, totalling 20 separate attacks. The first phase was... two attacks on the World Trade Center, an attack on the Pentagon and a third attack on the White House."

The notes also reflected that Lindh said: "The second phase of attacks was going to be using biological agents and also attacks on natural gas and nuclear infrastructure."

"The second phase was going to make the US forget about the first phase. The third phase was to finish the US and was to take place within the next six months (after September 11)," Gunaratna said that while Lindh used the word "biological," he believes from other sources that the weapon could be a radiological device, a so-called dirty bomb.

Gunaratna spoke with Lindh in his jail cell for eight hours on July 25-26 as a defence consultant, and submitted a report to a federal judge that concluded Lindh never swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

India terms Pak missile test an 'election gimmick'

AFP, New Delhi

India said Friday it was not perturbed by Pakistan's successful test firing of a medium range surface-to-surface Shaheen ballistic missile, dismissing it as an "election gimmick".

"We are not unnecessarily perturbed by this kind of missile test," an Indian defence ministry spokesman told AFP.

Foreign affairs spokeswoman Nirupama Rao was equally dismissive.

"This particular test is clearly targeted at the forthcoming general election in Pakistan," she told reporters.

"As we have said before, we are not particularly impressed with these missile antics of Pakistan," Rao added.

"As is well known, Pakistan mis-

siles are based on clandestinely imported materials, equipment and technology."

The missile test came amid renewed tension between Pakistan and India, which both have nuclear weapons, over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Pakistan said it had given prior notification of the test to neighbours as well as some friendly countries.

Tensions between Pakistan and India have been high since last December, when a deadly attack on India's parliament blamed on pan-Islamic militant groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad threatened to spark a new war.

Both groups were founded in Pakistan but were banned by President Pervez Musharraf in January.

The two countries have massed

nearly a million troops on their common borders since the attack.

Pakistan carried out a series of missile tests late May this year when tensions were at a peak with India.

In a 10 day period, it fired three missiles, starting with an indigenously developed Abdali, which is capable of carrying warheads accurately up to a range of 180 kilometres (110 miles).

It then test-fired a nuclear-capable medium-range Hatf-V (Ghauri), capable of striking deep inside Indian territory, followed by a newly-developed short-range Hatf-III (Ghaznavi) capable of carrying warheads up to 290 kilometres (180 miles) with great accuracy.

All three missiles were named after Muslim conquerors of Hindus in the sub-continent over the past nine centuries.



PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian Workers' Party presidential candidate Luis Inacio Lula da Silva poses for photographers before the last debate between the four main candidates on Thursday at the Globo TV studios in Rio de Janeiro. Da Silva leads with 48 per cent of the vote in opinion poll ahead of the election scheduled for Sunday.

Candidates hold key debate in Brazil

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's presidential candidates late Thursday held a final debate that could be key in determining the outcome of Sunday's elections, which Rio de Janeiro officials said drug gangs may seek to disrupt through violence.

Public perception of the four hopefuls' performance during the televised debate could play a decisive role in determining whether leftist Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the clear favorite, would be elected on Sunday.

Just before the discussion got under way, the Brazilian government announced it agreed to deploy military troops requested by the Rio state government.