



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao (L) shares a light moment with outgoing Premier Zhu Rongji (R) as they prepare to make their way out, after the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Wednesday. China opened its 10th NPC, one of the world's largest legislatures, that will usher in a new group of political leaders expected to be headed by Hu Jintao.

Zhu promises stability in his last address

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji Wednesday promised growth and stability in the year ahead in his last "state of the nation address" to the country's parliament on the opening day of its annual session.

In an 85-minute speech that made no mention of political reform, the 74-year-old said developing the rural economy would be the top priority of the government's economic work in 2003.

He set a seven percent target for economic growth in the current year as the National People's Congress (NPC) kicked off its long-awaited meeting in Beijing's Great Hall of the People that will usher in a new generation of leaders.

"This growth rate is both necessary and achievable through hard work," he said. "We should ... ensure a double-pull effect on economic growth from both consumption demand and investment demand."

For the sixth consecutive year, China will resort to large-scale infrastructure spending to help lift growth, financing the effort via 140 billion yuan (17 billion dollars) of special long-term bonds.

Although observers have argued the government can go on strengthening its way to higher growth for

some time yet, the policies have taken a toll on state coffers.

Finance Minister Xiang Huaicheng is expected to announce a record 319.8 billion yuan (39 billion dollar) public deficit for this year when he delivers his budget speech to the NPC on Thursday.

In his report, Zhu remained true to his reputation as China's "economic czar". He did, however, stress the need for social stability, telling the government it must continue its crackdown on cults and crimes.

"We must spare no effort in maintaining social stability," he said. "We must severely deal with all crimes in accordance with the law and watch out for and punish criminal activities of cult organizations."

China will also maintain its tough clampdown on ethnic separatism in the coming year, the premier promised.

"We will resolutely oppose any activity aimed at splitting the motherland or undermining ethnic solidarity," he said, without specifying which groups will be targeted.

Beijing is believed to be particularly concerned about separatist movements in the largely Muslim Xinjiang region.

US to go to war with or without UN: Powell

US troops buildup nears 3 lakh in Gulf

AFP, Moscow

The United States was prepared to launch war against Iraq no matter if the UN granted its support to the offensive, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said late Tuesday.

While Washington hoped that Iraq's disarmament could be achieved through peaceful means, if that failed, "the United States, with or without UN support, will lead the coalition of countries willing to join us to disarm Iraq by force," Powell told Russia's ORT television according to Russian translation.

So far Saddam Hussein refused to "make a strategic decision" on disarming Iraq, yielding only when under pressure, Powell said, adding that "those ridiculous games are now over."

However, Powell reiterated that the US call for a new UN resolution on Iraq was not a certain matter

and would be decided by next week in the course of talks with "our colleagues, including Russia."

The United States put forward the new resolution on Iraq to the UN Security Council last week, along with Britain and Spain. Russia, France and Germany, all current members of the Council, have opposed it, calling instead for increased UN weapons inspections in Iraq.

However, Powell insisted that while Washington "understands and respects Russia's stance," the United States did not share the view put forth by Russia and France that UN monitors should be allowed more time to work in Iraq.

"The issue is not about giving weapons inspectors more time, weapons are not an issue at all. The issue is whether Saddam Hussein made a strategic decision to disarm, and we do not have any reason to believe he did," Powell added.

AP adds: The Army's oldest armoured division, "Old Ironsides," got orders Tuesday to head for the Persian Gulf as the total of U.S. land, sea and air forces arrayed against Iraq or preparing to go neared 300,000.

The commander who would lead the war, Gen. Tommy R. Franks, met at the Pentagon with Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and was to consult with President Bush at the White House on Wednesday. Last week Franks reviewed his war plan with commanders at his Gulf command post.

The pace of troop movements and high-level consultations suggested the military was close to ready for the opening of what would be a multidirectional assault to disarm and depose Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Laden's wives, children could be in Iran

AFP, Washington

During the time he was being hunted in Afghanistan, then Pakistan, al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden's four wives and more than a dozen children were probably sheltered in Iran, Time Magazine reported Tuesday.

They were probably given shelter by Iran's "zealously anti-American Revolutionary Guards," the magazine said in a report on its web site that quoted a Pakistani intelligence source.

"This source also claimed that bin Laden's lieutenant and ideologue, Egyptian doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri, had left the region on an unknown mission, but had returned to Pakistan and was now believed to be hiding with his terrorist chief," the Time report said.

US, allies begin accepting idea of nuclear N Korea

AFP, Washington

The United States and its Asian allies have begun to accept the idea of a nuclear-armed North Korea and are turning their attention to preventing Pyongyang from selling nuclear material to the highest bidder, US media reported Wednesday.

Citing unnamed officials and analysts, The Washington Post said that envoys for the new South Korean president, Roh Moo Hyun, shocked Bush advisers in Washington recently when they said they would rather have a nuclear North Korea than a chaotic collapse of its government there.

In Japan, officials feel their neighbour cannot be stopped from producing a bomb, the newspaper said.

According to The Los Angeles Times, administration officials said in closed briefings and private

conversations with members of Congress over the last several weeks, that they expected North Korea to begin reprocessing its plutonium stockpiles perhaps within a few weeks.

Once reprocessing begins, North Korea will be able to produce enough plutonium for one nuclear weapon a month.

"The administration has acquiesced in North Korea becoming a nuclear power," The Post quoted a well-informed US Senate source as saying.

According to the paper, US officials have begun to contend that a decision by North Korea to begin reprocessing spent nuclear fuel rods into weapons-grade plutonium will represent a diplomatic opportunity to swing international opinion to its side.

Israel completes deployment of anti-missile batteries

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has completed deployment of anti-missile batteries to face any retaliatory strike by Iraq in the event of a US-led war, but a top commander admitted for the first time that Saddam Hussein does not have the ability to hit the Jewish state.

Military Intelligence Chief General Aharon Zeevi was quoted by the daily Haaretz as saying that Iraq had not deployed missiles in its western territory, the only area from which its now banned arsenal could hit Israel.

Although the threat of a repeat of the 1991 Gulf war when Iraq retaliated against the US-led operation to liberate Kuwait by firing 39 Scud missiles armed with conventional warheads against the Jewish state, the army advised the public to step up war preparations.

Bush, Vajpayee talk about Iraq, Kashmir as allies

PTI, Washington

The White House has described Tuesday's telephonic conversation between Prime Minister AB Vajpayee and US President George W Bush as one between "allies".

Asked whether the call by Bush had anything to do with India-Pakistan tensions, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said: "The President and Prime Minister Vajpayee talk from time to time. It is not predicated on any one event or another. It is part of what allies do."

"And the situation involving Kashmir and the Line of Control has long been a contentious issue and an issue that involves tension on both sides, and so this is a matter of ongoing diplomacy by the United States."

About the telephonic conversation, Fleischer said Bush and Vajpayee spoke and agreed about the need for Iraq to fully disarm and comply with the UN Security Council resolution 1441.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai models and activists perform at a "Peace Fashion" collection in Bangkok on Wednesday. The fashion collection was designed by Thai artist Vasan Sitthiket as a protest against war on Iraq.

Tape on Mayawati rocks Lok Sabha again

PTI, New Delhi

The video tape controversy involving UP Chief Minister rocked Lok Sabha for the second day on Wednesday with Mayawati writing to the Centre a letter but the Government refused to either table it or divulge the contents and requested the Speaker to take a view on it.

As the Samajwadi Party members were on their feet during Zero Hour protesting Mayawati's reported statement that MPs and legislators should contribute their "cuts" from constituency development funds to the party coffers, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani said he talked to her yesterday and she had written a letter to him explaining the position.

Since allegations had also been levelled against Samajwadi Party, he did not think it proper that the issue be discussed here, Advani said, suggesting let the matter

remain confined to the State Assembly.

He did not think it proper to make a statement on the issue based on Mayawati's letter because it contained her views, Advani said, pointing out that the State Assembly was seized of the matter and perhaps a no confidence motion was likely to be taken up.

Quoting Mayawati that the video tape was recorded in February 2001, Advani said he would send her letter to the Speaker for perusal and would like to know from him whether a statement could be made on that basis.

When Congress Chief Whip Priyaranjan Dasgupta insisted on tabling of the letter, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee intervened to say that he too had a copy of the letter and requested the Speaker to go through the letter and decide.

World far short of hunger reduction goal: UN

REUTERS, Rome

Seven years after the target was set, the world is well below the goal of cutting in half the number of hungry people by 2015 and may not even reach that goal by 2030, a new study by the United Nations food body said Tuesday.

The study by the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said the world's population will be better fed by 2030 than it is now, but that hundreds of millions of people in developing nations will be chronically hungry.

"The study says that the number of hungry people is expected to decline from around 800 million today to about 440 million in 2030," Rome-based FAO said in a statement.

"This means that the target of the (FAO) World Food Summit in 1996, to reduce the number of

hungry by half by 2015, will not even be met by 2030."

The report, entitled, "World agriculture: toward 2015/2030," is FAO's latest global assessment of the long-term outlook for food and agriculture. It updates a 1995 study.

Growth in food production will exceed population growth, it said.

"Per capita food supplies will have increased and the incidence of undernourishment will have been further reduced in most developing regions," FAO Director General Jacques Diouf wrote in his foreword to the report.

However, parts of South Asia may still be in a difficult position and much of sub-Saharan Africa will probably not be significantly better off than at present in the absence of concerted action, Diouf said.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman cheers Iraqi security forces marching in Baghdad on Wednesday. Thousands of security troops and 120 would-be kamikazes marched through the Iraqi capital in a defiant show of strength as Washington threatens to unleash war to oust the Saddam regime.

'Water wars' risk not so bad as feared: UN

AFP, Paris

The risk that dwindling supplies of fresh water will spark bloody regional conflicts in dry regions of the world is far smaller than feared, a United Nations report said on Wednesday.

The threat of "water wars" has risen up the international agenda in the past couple of years, propelled by warnings from think tanks and political leaders and by tensions in the Middle East, the region that suffers from the worst water scarcity.

But according to the UN study, the World Water Development Report, wars triggered by water disputes are historically rare and there are good reasons for thinking the future will be no different.

"Despite the potential for dispute in transboundary (river) basins, the record of cooperation historically overwhelms the record of acute conflict over international water resources," the World Water Development Report says.

In the past 50 years, it says, there have been only 37 cross-border disputes which have involved violence, while some 200 treaties on water-sharing have been negotiated and signed.

This implies countries realise that "violence over water is not strategically rational, effective or economically viable," according to the study.

The document was drawn up by the World Water Assessment Programme, an association of 23

UN agencies that is hosted by the Paris-based agency UNESCO.

It was published on Wednesday ahead of the Third World Water Forum, a major conference on the future of the world's fresh water supplies, taking place in Kyoto, Japan, from March 16-23.

Overall, the report paints a pessimistic outlook about water problems, saying the world's population will surge over the next two decades while the availability of fresh water, hit by pollution and waste, would shrink.

Many of the countries that will face a water crunch are located in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, where there is a record of chronic instability and exchanges of blows.

But the report contends that water can be "both an irritant and ... a unifier" between countries that are at loggerheads.

A good treaty overseen by a strong institution can ensure that water is shared wisely and can also create an enduring bond, it argues.

It gave the example of the 1960 Indo-Pakistani treaty on sharing the water of the Indus, which has survived two wars between the two neighbours; the Mekong Committee, which has functioned since 1957 and exchanged data throughout the Vietnam War; and the Nile Basin Initiative, an "extremely promising" scheme launched in 1999 gathering all 10 riparian, or river-bank, states along the world's longest river.