



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 spending its way to higher growth for

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

Finance Minister Xiang Huaiqiang 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 separation 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.

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, prodded by warnings from thinktanks 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.

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.



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 go through the letter and decide.

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 Dasmuni 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.

Lanka offers amnesty to 51,000 army deserters

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Tuesday offered immunity from prosecution to some 51,000 military deserters in line with a major overhaul of security forces carried out amid a truce with Tamil Tiger rebels.

The defence ministry said deserters will be "legally discharged" from the security forces after they pay any money they owe the military, while those wanting to rejoin will also be considered.

The sweeping move was in sharp contrast to earlier crackdowns against deserters and warnings to the country's private sector not to employ soldiers who had run away from their units in the military.

"Steps will be adopted to legally discharge army deserters from service and issue certificates of

discharge for those who have deserted the army," the statement said.

An official spokesman said the move would help a large number of young men to come out of hiding and seek employment without taking up a career of crime.

"The scheme will be implemented in stages from about April," an official source said, adding that the authorities were trying to streamline the discharge process by engaging the services of district civil administrators.

Those opting for the discharge will have to if desertions came during the heavy fighting with Tamil rebels in the past two decades.

In recent years, the annual desertion rate has been as high as 4,000, officials said.

The heavy military casualties

during clashes with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also saw both sides finding it difficult to attract new recruits.

The LTTE has admitted losing about 17,600 of its cadres since the first Tiger rebel was killed in November 1982 at the hands of the military, while security forces too have suffered similar fatalities during the same period.

Over 35,000 government troops and Tiger rebels are also estimated to have been wounded in the armed conflict which escalated in July 1983, but began in the early 1970s.

The total strength of the Sri Lankan military is estimated at about 150,000. While there are no reliable estimates for the strength of Tiger rebels, figures between 6,000 to 16,000 have been mentioned in recent times.