

## Lockerbie payments tied to lifting US sanction: Libya

AFP, Washington

Libya's prime minister, in an interview published in The New York Times, urged Washington to lift its sanctions on Libya by May 12, the deadline for Tripoli to complete compensation payments to the families of the victims of the Lockerbie disaster.

Prime Minister Shukri Ghanim said the United States should act quickly to reward Libya for its decision last month to dismantle its secret weapons programs, a process his government would like to "accelerate to the maximum."

He said a decision on the sanctions was an "internal matter" for the United States, but that it should be aware of deadlines and their consequences.

Libya was under international sanctions for years over the December 1988 bombing of a US airliner over the Scottish town of Lockerbie that killed 270 people.

## Israeli army lifts Jenin blockade

REUTERS, Jenin

Palestinians in a West Bank city now separated from Israel by a controversial barrier awoke on Friday to a rare sight -- streets empty of Israeli forces that pulled out after a long encirclement.

The army said removal of the "closure" it imposed on Jenin in August after a truce declared by Palestinian factions collapsed amid violence was "in keeping with assessments of the security situation."

Residents said routes were opened between the city's eight entrances and surrounding villages after Israeli troops dismantled roadblocks and tanks pulled back.

The West Bank barrier, which Israel says is stopping suicide bombers from reaching its cities, looms several miles to the north and northwest.

## Astronomers identify possible cradle of alien life

AFP, Sydney

Australian astronomers have pinpointed an area of the Milky Way that is most likely to support alien life, they revealed yesterday.

"Our Milky Way galaxy is home to hundreds of billions of stars, but until recently astronomers could only guess as to how many are hospitable for the development of complex life," Charles Lineweaver, from University of New South Wales, said in a statement.

"What we have done for the first time is to quantify carefully where complex life is likely to exist."

Lineweaver and Swinburne University of Technology colleagues Yeshe Fenner and Brad Gibson, in a paper published in the journal "Science", say hundreds of stars capable of supporting life are visible from Earth by the naked eye.

"A few billion stars out there sit in what we call the Galactic Habitable Zone where they have the appropriate conditions to support complex life," Gibson said.

## 'Don't ask who's dead, just ask who's still alive'

AFP, Bam

Shawn Baniassadi was in Chicago, Illinois, when he first heard about the devastating earthquake that hit Bam, the town where he was born 28 years ago.

Come Friday he was working as an interpreter at a US field hospital set up on the grounds of a revolutionary guard camp in the centre of the city where he once went to school.

"It was six in the morning when I first heard the news from a relative in Tehran. I was crazed and shocked. I went to my computer to check the news online," said Baniassadi, now a US citizen who works as a pharmaceutical doctor in Evanston, Illinois.

He immediately flew to Iran to check on his relatives and linked up by chance with an official 80-man team flown in by the US government to provide emergency medical help.

"I couldn't believe what I saw. It was beyond my imagination," Baniassadi said, describing his first encounter with the city, 90% of which was destroyed by the quake which registered 6.3 on the Richter scale.



PHOTO: AFP  
Nepali Foreign Minister Dr Bhekh B Thapa (L) hands over the chairmanship of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) to his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri (C) in Islamabad yesterday. The seven-nation Saarc, holding its 12th summit in Islamabad from January 4, was founded in 1985 in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka to promote economic cooperation in the heavily militarised and poverty-ridden region.

## India for joint operation with Myanmar against rebels

AFP, New Delhi

India is training troops in Myanmar for a possible joint operation against anti-Indian rebels amid a similar crackdown in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, the chief of the Indian army said yesterday.

General N.C. Vij said separatists fighting in northeastern India were still operating in neighbouring Bangladesh and Myanmar after losing most of their bases in Bhutan.

"We have sent our troops to train Myanmar forces and we might well come up to that stage for joint operations," Vij said in Guwahati, the capital of the revolt-ridden state of Assam, after a visit to the Bhutan border.

"Myanmar and Bangladesh are still safe havens for the militants, but the presence of militants is comparatively higher in Bangladesh than in Myanmar," Vij told reporters.

Vij is the latest Indian official to allege a rebel presence in

Bangladesh, which denies any extremists operate from its territory.

Bhutan, at the urging of New Delhi, on December 15 launched its first military operation in modern times to oust three rebel groups that had carried out hit-and-run attacks on Indian targets from bases in the Buddhist kingdom.

Vij said 650 rebels had been killed or taken into custody. He did not break down the figure.

The Indian army, which is backing the operation, had earlier reported the deaths of 141 rebels and eight Bhutanese troops and support personnel since the offensive started.

Bhutan has not released casualty figures but said its forces have destroyed all 30 camps run by the militants.

Vij, however, said rebels still controlled two bases.

"Militants are still holding on to two of their camps and fighting is still going on there," he said. "But very soon they will be neutralised."

The rebel strength was estimated at 3,000 before the operation began. More than 10,000 people have died in separatist violence in Assam since the 1980s.

India has in recent years been building ties with Myanmar, partly to counter what it perceives as growing Chinese influence on its neighbour.

Ties were strained after the military took power in Yangon in 1988 and India granted sanctuary to exiles.

The military campaign by Indian ally Bhutan came ahead of a seven-nation South Asian summit that will start Sunday in Islamabad.

Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha said Thursday that the Bhutanese campaign was "an example worth emulating by all those countries where terrorism takes shelter."

Bangladeshi troops later Thursday arrested six armed Indian nationals in the Habiganj district.

## Red alert in Pakistan for Saarc summit

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's massive security clamp-down went into top gear here yesterday for the forthcoming Saarc regional summit as army helicopters buzzed low over the capital, which resembled a city under siege.

Around 10,000 paramilitary troops and police are manning a heavy security blanket around normally sleepy Islamabad. Roadblocks have been erected at all entry points to the city where pass-

ers-by were being frisked and vehicles checked for bombs.

A so-called "red zone" covering a radius of around two kilometers (just over one mile) has been established around the two main hotels where heads of state and senior delegates are staying, and the Convention Centre where opening and closing ceremonies will be held.

"It is one of the most stringent security operations in the history of the country," said a senior security official.

Anti-aircraft guns and troops have been positioned in the Margalla hills overlooking the city while popular hiking and jogging tracks have been declared out of bounds.

All schools, colleges and religious seminars will remain closed for a week.

Security for the Saarc summit became the top concern after two attempts to assassinate President Pervez Musharraf in the adjoining city of Rawalpindi.

# Current peace move is my last attempt: Vajpayee

## Kashmir issues won't be ignored

PTI, AFP, Islamabad

Asserting that the current peace initiative with Pakistan was his "last attempt", Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has said terrorism was the biggest obstacle in the way of solving Kashmir and other issues between India and Pakistan.

"This is my last attempt", Vajpayee, who will arrive in Islamabad today to participate in the Saarc summit told Pakistan daily 'Dawn' in an wide ranging interview, indicating that age was not in his side to continue with such efforts in future.

Sounding conciliatory with hints to make some important confidence building measures to supplement the ones made by the two countries in the past few months, Vajpayee sounded categorical in asserting that only terrorism remained a hurdle for resolving the vexed issues between the two countries.

Stating that there was vast consensus in India for peace initiatives with Pakistan, Vajpayee said the widespread impression in India was to see whether the Indian peace initiatives were getting matching response from Pakistan.

AFP adds: India is open to dis-

missing the decades-old territorial dispute over Kashmir with Pakistan, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in an interview published yesterday on the eve of a regional summit.

But its concerns at "terrorism" in the Himalayan state, where anti-India militants have been waging a bloody insurgency against Indian rule since 1989, must be addressed first, he told Pakistan's Dawn newspaper.

"I can see no obstacle to establishment of a climate of friendship and cordiality in which we can discuss and resolve all our outstanding bilateral issues including Jammu and Kashmir," Vajpayee was quoted as saying.

Issues concerning Kashmir, claimed by both India and Pakistan but divided between them since 1948, will not be ignored, he said.

"They will remain on the agenda. If we discuss them with friendship and understanding -- rather than suspicion and hostility -- we are likely to find acceptable solutions much earlier," he told the English-language daily.

The Indian leader's comments were published a day ahead of his arrival in Islamabad -- on his first visit to neighbouring Pakistan since

1999 -- for a regional South Asia summit.

Hopes are high that both sides will use the summit for their first meeting, albeit informal, since coming close to war for most of 2002 following an attack on India's parliament. New Delhi blamed Pakistan-backed militants for the December 2001 attack, in which 14 people including the five gunmen were killed.

Pakistan denied any link but India deployed massive troop numbers to their common border and Pakistan followed suit, pitching the region on the brink of a feared nuclear conflict.

Since Vajpayee's "hand of friendship" offer in April 2003 both sides have moved to mend ties, reviving diplomatic and transport links severed since 2002, and initiating an unprecedented ceasefire along boundaries in Kashmir.

Vajpayee, 79, acknowledged however that "both countries have taken several positive steps since then" and said the ceasefire meant cross-border infiltration by militants into Indian-held Kashmir could no longer take place.

However he repeated that this was his final bid for peace with Pakistan.

"This is my last attempt," he said.

The reason bilateral talks had still not taken place, despite eight months passing since his peace offer, was ongoing concerns in New Delhi at "terrorism" in Indian-held Kashmir, Vajpayee said.

He was optimistic however at the new momentum for peace and urged both sides take advantage of it.

"These eight months have witnessed the groundswell of popular enthusiasm in the people of both our countries, parliamentarians and political workers, businessmen and professionals, artists and social activists -- for a normal, peaceful and cooperative bilateral relationship," Vajpayee said.

"We should build on the momentum and on the recent positive developments in a constructive manner."

Asked what factors were forcing the nuclear neighbours to mend ties, he named popular demand and globalisation pressures for "faster economic development."

"In the post-Cold War world, it is in our national interest to join hands in tackling the many common problems we face in our countries and with the outside world," he added.

## US captures Iraqi suspected of smuggling in foreign fighters

AFP, Baghdad

US troops arrested an Iraqi who was believed to be smuggling foreign fighters into Iraq from Syria, and also captured 10 Muslim fundamentalists northeast of Baghdad, the military said yesterday.

In the western town of Ar-Rutbah, soldiers from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment on Thursday caught a man they suspected of bringing foreign fighters inside Iraq from Syria.

"This afternoon at 12:35 am (0935 GMT), elements of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment captured Abu Mohammed... a key facilitator operating in the al-Anbar province," the military said in a statement.

"He is believed to be responsible for moving foreign fighters and large sums of cash throughout the area of operations."



PHOTO: AFP  
Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC) soldiers ground a suspected Iraqi militant during a patrol in Tikrit, 180km north of Iraqi capital Baghdad yesterday. US troops arrested an Iraqi who was believed to be smuggling foreign fighters into Iraq from Syria, and also captured 10 fundamentalists northeast of Baghdad, the military said. In the western town of Ar-Rutbah, soldiers from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment caught a man they suspected of bringing foreign fighters inside Iraq from Syria.

## Ethnic violence rages in Kirkuk: 3 killed

AFP, Kirkuk

Two Kurds were found stabbed to death in Kirkuk Thursday and an Arab was killed in clashes with police as ethnic tensions boiled over again in this northern Iraqi oil centre.

The violence flared the day after three people were killed and dozens more wounded when clashes erupted between Kurdish fighters from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Arab and Turkmen demonstrators in Kirkuk.

## Bush denies policy shift on Iran

BBC ONLINE

US President George W Bush has said that moves to help Iran in the wake of the earthquake are not a sign of a thaw in relations with Tehran.

US authorities announced on Wednesday that sanctions on the transfer of money would be eased to help relief efforts.

Senior Iranian officials welcomed the measures and said it was a positive step towards improved relations.

But Bush said Tehran needed to do more if it wanted better ties with Washington.

Among these were the handing

over of al-Qaeda suspects held in the country, and the end of what Bush called Iran's nuclear weapons programme.

The US president was speaking on the day a memorial service was held for the victims of last Friday's earthquake in Bam.

As the city mourned the loss of up to 50,000 of its approximately 100,000 citizens, there was the odd glimmer of hope as reports - mostly unsubstantiated - surfaced of people found alive amid the rubble.

The US easing of sanctions means that, over the next 90 days, donations from American citizens and non-governmental organisations can be made to groups in Iran

without needing specific authorisation from the US treasury.

Sensitive technology, including computers and satellite telephones, can also be exported to the country.

"What we're doing in Iran is we're showing the Iranian people the American people care, that they've got great compassion for human suffering," Bush told reporters.

Aid workers from the US have already joined the effort to help survivors, in the first official representation by Americans since Washington cut ties with Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

## Britain, Mexico cancel flights to US

REUTERS, Washington

Britain and Mexico canceled flights to the United States while US warplanes have been tailing inbound Air France flights for fear attackers might try to crash them into American targets, US officials said Thursday.

Security fears amid a heightened terror alert also prompted a two-day suspension of oil shipments to ensure the security of our homeland," consistent with Code Orange, the heightened alert level in effect since Dec. 21, said Russ Knocke, a Department of Homeland Security spokesman.

It was not clear what specifically triggered the decision to suspend the traffic.

Valdez is the terminal for the trans-Alaskan pipeline from Prudhoe Bay. The 800-mile pipeline normally carries about 1 million barrels a day to Valdez, or about 17 percent of US domestic production.

A Bush administration official said US intelligence remained particularly concerned about "credible" threats to Los Angeles-bound flights from Paris and Mexico City.

In boosting the alert level last month, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda movement appeared intent on matching or outdoing the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacked airliner attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people.



PHOTO: AFP  
A former 'comfort woman', who served as sex slave for Japanese troops during World War II, shouts slogans during an anti-Japanese rally in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul yesterday. The protesters were opposed to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's surprise visit to a shrine honouring Japan's war dead.

## Pak nukes are 'secure': Bush

AFP, Falfurrias

US President George W. Bush said Thursday that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal was "secure" following two failed assassination attempts on President Pervez Musharraf in the last three weeks.

Bush also said he emerged from a recent telephone conversation with Musharraf convinced that the "friend of the United States" and ally in the global war on terrorism had the situation under control.

"Obviously terrorists are after him and he sounded very confident that his security forces would be able to deal with the threat," Bush said. "He sounded confident and therefore I feel confident about his security situation."

In response to a reporter's question, the US leader said that Pakistan's nuclear weapons "are secure and that's important. It's also important that India as well have a secure nuclear weapons program."

Bush praised the atomic rivals for working to resolve longstanding disputes peacefully, and said they appeared to be making headway "slowly but surely" on defusing simmering rows like the one over the disputed territory of

Kashmir.

"I commend the leaders of both countries for taking steps toward a peaceful reconciliation of major issues that have divided them," he said. "It looks like they're making progress towards reconciling differences, slowly but surely."

India stunned the world in 1998 by conducting five nuclear tests and declaring itself a nuclear power. Pakistan, which has fought three full-fledged wars with India, conducted its own tests within days.

The two countries have undertaken a series of tie-mending moves since April and took another step closer to normal relations Thursday by resuming commercial flights after a two-year ban.

The flights resumed three days before Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was due to make his first visit to Pakistan in four years for a seven-nation South Asian leader summit.

"We're hopeful that the Indians and Pakistanis, in upcoming meetings, will be able to begin a dialogue on a variety of issues," Bush said after an afternoon hunting quail with his father, former president George Bush, in Falfurrias, Texas.

Bush also praised Musharraf for his help in the war on terrorism, launched after members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"President Musharraf has been a friend of the United States. He's been a stand-up guy when it comes to dealing with the terrorists," he said.

"We are making progress against al-Qaeda because of his cooperation. We need to do more, particularly on the Pakistan-Afghan border," said Bush, who later returned to his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

US officials have expressed concern that members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban Islamic militia have been staging cross-border attacks meant to destabilize the fragile rule of Afghanistan's fledgling government.

Musharraf, who appointed himself to the presidency in June 2001 after toppling an elected government in a bloodless army coup in 1999, has escaped two near-miss assassination attempts in the past three weeks.

He claimed a mandate for another five years in a flawed May 2002 referendum.