

Activists in Delhi decries bid to control water

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, from New Delhi

Water is not a commodity to be bought and sold and controlled. Water is a common property of all the global communities and we have a collective responsibility to address the need of all.

With this basic principle, the People's World Water Forum (PWWF), a non-government organisation (NGO), launched here Monday a three-day meeting of water activists from more than 70 countries.

The event's main aim is to fight moves for privatisation of water by multinational companies, backed by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and to ensure that governments all over the world guarantee availability of water as a human right.

Ricardo Petrella, secretary general of International Committee for Global Water Contract, said several lawmakers and NGOs from all over the world had signed in Rome last year a declaration that proclaimed access to water as a human right.

Danielle Mitterrand, wife of former French president Francois Mitterrand, suggested that one percent of defence budget of every

country should be set aside to ensure a minimum of 40 litres of water, which is needed to sustain human life, per person per day free of cost.

Water activists, including Tony Clarke and Maude Barlow of Canada, Danuta Sacher of Germany, Nia Robinson of the USA, Al Hasan of Ghana and Vandana Shiva of Indian NGO Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Environment, said their mission was to prod governments to resist pressure to include water services in the list of negotiable services under the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Shiva said the PWWF "has been formed to counter the moves by the World Water Council, a think-tank run by the WB and the IMF as well as major water corporate groups, which does not speak for the people who do not want the dwindling supplies of fresh water to be privatised, commercialised and put in the open market for sale."

She pointed out that the government of Delhi plans to supply the Ganges water free of cost to a French company for operating and maintaining a water treatment plant, only to buy back the treated water at a high price.

Shiva also mentioned of the Delhi government's move to hike water tariffs by five times.

Another Indian water activist Rajinder Singh said, "No single country can, on its own, fight the cause of water. So, every local movement has to be interconnected to converge into a larger movement."

"No one has the right to steal a resource of the nature. It must remain in public hands," added Barlow.

Barlow said "we have seen the failure of multinational corporations usurping water services in Bolivia and elsewhere. We have seen the failure of the schemes to divert water from Canada to mid-west America because the aquifers are drying up in the United States. The developing world must learn from that."

According to Clarke, river-linking and canal projects on a large-scale would lead to ecological disaster.

The common theme of the water activists' speeches at the inaugural session of the three-day meeting was that water cannot be sold for profit and the challenge is to free the water from the clutches of the multinational corporations.



A US soldier from 720th Military Police Battalion orders an Iraqi detainee to lay on the ground as they a raid in a house in Samarra, some 125 kilometers west of Iraqi capital Baghdad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Canada may bid on Iraq projects: Bush

AP, Monterrey

President Bush, working to smooth relations with allies who opposed the Iraq war, reversed course Tuesday and said Canada could bid for lucrative Iraqi reconstruction projects.

Three or four other countries also will be eligible, Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said, but he declined to identify them. France, Germany and Russia have been furious that Bush excluded them from postwar contracts because they opposed the U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

In Paris, French officials said they were unaware of any policy change on contracts.

Bush announced his change of heart about Canada in his first

meeting with the country's new Prime Minister, Paul Martin. "It actually does show that, working together, you can arrive at a reasonable solution," Martin said at a picture-taking session with Bush. U.S. officials said Canada would be eligible to bid on roughly \$4.5 billion in reconstruction projects.

Later, White House press secretary Scott McClellan said any country that, like Canada, had been excluded because of opposition to the Iraq war could now qualify if it had made a pledge toward Iraq's reconstruction at a donors' conference in Madrid, Spain, in October.

Bush cited Canada's pledge of \$225 million toward Iraq's reconstruction - one of the largest at the conference and its expressions of support for the US-led political

efforts in Iraq as the reason it won a spot on the contracting list.

McClellan also held out the possibility for other nations, perhaps such as those that have agreed to forgive some of Iraq's massive foreign debt. That category would include France, Germany and Russia, none of which made contributions in Madrid.

It was Bush's second fence-mending session at the Summit of the Americas, a gathering of 34 leaders from throughout the hemisphere. On Monday, Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox (news - web sites) put aside two years of differences and rallied behind a new US proposal to grant legal status to millions of undocumented workers.

British peace activist shot by Israeli forces dies

BBC NEWS ONLINE

A British peace activist shot in the head while observing the Israeli army in Gaza last April has died in hospital.

Tom Hurndall, 22, was overcome by pneumonia at the Royal Hospital for Neurodisability, in south-west London.

Mr Hurndall, of north London, had been in a coma since being shot in a Palestinian refugee camp. An Israeli soldier has already been indicted on six charges, including one of aggravated assault. Mr Hurndall's family now want a murder charge.

Eyewitnesses are said to have

seen Mr Hurndall, a former photography student at Manchester Metropolitan University, pulling two Palestinian children to safety in Rafah.

The soldier initially said he had returned fire at a man armed with a pistol - but under interrogation admitted firing a shot near an unarmed civilian, according to the Israeli army.

Israel first announced an investigation into the shooting in October.

When its investigation concludes, a decision will be made over whether to bring any charges.

But Mr Hurndall's family, from Tufnell Park, north London, have

called for an independent investigation into his shooting, saying any Israeli army investigation will be a whitewash.

"We're hugely relieved that we've got this far, that the soldier has been charged," Mr Hurndall's sister, Sophie Hurndall, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

But she warned: "We've yet to see what his sentence is going to be."

"The army has been the whole way along with this trying to get itself off the hook, and its soldiers."

"What happens in the occupied territories is covered up at any costs."



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami delivers a speech at the parliament in Tehran yesterday.

Khatami stands by defiant MPs

AFP, Tehran

Iran's embattled President Mohammad Khatami yesterday stood by a dramatic threat to lead a mass resignation of reformists, vowing to fight off an attempt by hardliners to bar his allies from next month's crucial elections.

"The president stated that the rejection of candidacies was illegal and not acceptable," reformist MP Ahmad Borghani said after closed-door talks with Khatami.

"The president emphasised what he said on Tuesday, and said he was optimistic that the efforts of him and the Majlis president Mehdi Karubi, would prevail," the MP told reporters.

Late Tuesday, Khatami laid down the gauntlet to the conservative-run Guardians Council, an unelected 12-member watchdog

that vets legislation and screens all candidates for public office.

"We have to remain firm. If one day we are asked to leave, then we will all leave, together," the usually mild-mannered president warned. The departure of the reformist government, in place after reformists have scooped up massive majorities in past elections, could plunge Iran into political chaos and send it back into international isolation.

The Council is seeking to disqualify nearly half of the 8,000 people hoping to stand for parliament on February 20. Most are reformists, among them some 80 who currently sit in the Majlis.

And in what appeared to be an effort to focus the protest movement and ease the risk of violence, Khatami appealed to MPs the end their four-day-old sit-in at the Majlis building.

13 Maoists and a police among 15 killed in Nepal

PTI, Kathmandu

Thirteen Maoists and a police personnel were killed in separate encounters in Nepal, while 10 rebels laid down their arms, the country's defence ministry said on Wednesday.

The ministry said four rebels were killed in Barne area of Jhapa district and Ghuseni area in Kavre district when they tried to breach a security cordon.

In separate encounters with security forces, one Maoist each was killed at Arkhawang area in Gulmi district, Rambhorbhata area in Parsa, Chaurase area in Surkhet, Chaumala area in Salyan and Nirga area in Dang districts, it said.

Pak minister disappears in remote tribal region

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani provincial minister has gone missing in an unruly tribal region hugging the Afghan border and a hectic four-day search has failed to find any clues to his whereabouts, officials said Wednesday.

Naemullah Shahani, minister for Sports and Culture in central Punjab province, was on a private visit to North Waziristan, a rugged semi-autonomous tribal district last weekend.

Local officials said Shahani went to the area to purchase a four-wheel drive vehicle in Miranshah, North Waziristan's main town, where vehicles of all types are smuggled from Afghanistan and sold at relatively low prices.

Murder trial of Swedish foreign minister opens

AFP, Stockholm

A 25-year-old man charged with murdering Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh four months ago pleaded "not guilty" as the trial opened in a packed Stockholm courtroom under tight security.

Mijailo Mijailovic, a 25-year-old Swede born to Serbian parents, confessed last week to police that he fatally stabbed Lindh, one of the country's most popular politicians, but his lawyer said his client did not mean to take her life.

"He admits that he attacked Lindh with a knife and that he caused her death, but he denies

intending to kill her," his lawyer Peter Althin told the court.

But prosecutor Agneta Bliidberg defended the murder charge, which implies that Mijailovic had every intent of killing the politician when he pounced on her with a knife in a crowded Stockholm department store on September 10.

Mijailovic, who is to testify later Wednesday, appeared calm as he entered the courtroom and took his seat facing the judge's bench. Sporting a beard and cropped hair, Mijailovic wore a dark jumper and dark trousers, and at one point glanced at the packed courtroom behind him.

Sri Lanka's president under fire

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Sri Lanka's president has been accused of untenable arrogance by the prime minister, her rival for power.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga told the nation on Tuesday that a secret swearing-in ceremony had extended her term by a year - until the end of 2006.

GI Peiris, a spokesman for the prime minister, said the president's move was undemocratic and illegal.

The president and the prime minister's feud has paralysed efforts to make peace with Sri Lankan Tamil rebels.

Is the president acting democratically? Tell us what you think.

Talks aimed at ending their decades-long civil war ground to a halt last year, after the president

seized several key ministries, claiming Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe had jeopardised national security.

Mr Peiris told reporters the government believed the president must leave office by the end of next year.

"That degree of arrogance is unacceptable with regard to the tenure of any public position," he said.

"No-one who holds public office is in a position to say that they will decide for themselves when their office comes to an end."

Mr Peiris said the government did not believe there was a legal argument in support of the president's move.

He said he had never heard of a country where the president took part in a secret swearing-in ceremony without the knowledge of parliament and the people.



PHOTO: AFP

French journalists Jean-Paul Guilloteau (L) and Marc Epstein arrive at Roissy airport outside Paris yesterday, a day after a higher court in Pakistan allowed them to leave the country despite their conviction for visa violations. The two French reporters for the weekly L'Express were arrested in December last year for violating their journalists' visas by travelling to the south-western city of Quetta near the Afghan border.