

## US keeps a watchful eye on Pakistani nukes

### Bush admin welcomes Indo-Pak talks

ANI, Washington

Keen to ensure that Pakistan's non-involvement in any kind of proliferating activity, the United States is said to be applying the required pressure on Islamabad to ensure that its nuclear technologies remains firmly under the control of the National Command Authority.

"We've had an ongoing dialogue with Pakistan, underscoring the importance of safeguarding Pakistan's nuclear technologies, making sure they remain under the control of their National Command Authority," the US State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, was quoted by the Daily Times, as saying.

Welcoming the Musharraf regime's moves to keep the International Atomic Energy Agency

(IAEA) informed about its investigations into the nuclear leaks to North Korea, Iran and Libya, Boucher further went on to say that, "We look forward to hearing from the Pakistani government about the facts they have developed during the course of their investigation. That's important to the international community, to be able to track down this network and see where it leads and make sure we can follow up and root out the network wherever it exists."

On whether Pakistan faced the possibility of sanctions being imposed on it for the leaks, he said, "I would not speculate on that at this point. I think first we need to see what happened and what actions the Pakistani government took."

He also rejected allegations that

Pakistan had broken any commitments. "We think the investigation that is going on now indicates how seriously they take that commitment, and how the Pakistani government is trying to ensure that it is not engaged in any proliferating activity and ensure that nobody in Pakistan is doing that."

AFP adds: The United States on Wednesday welcomed an agreement between India and Pakistan to open talks on the disputed region of Kashmir, which marked another significant step forward for their tentative peace process.

The agreement came after three days of talks in Islamabad, which further sweetened a mood of quiet optimism, which has settled around relations between the two bitter rivals in recent months.

## Pak leaders cautious over deal with India

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani political and religious parties voiced caution yesterday over an agreement with New Delhi to continue peace talks, with accusations that India's ruling party was using it to win votes at home.

Several leaders here also criticised President Pervez Musharraf for "moving away" from Pakistan's stand on the key issue of Kashmir while India's "repression" in the disputed territory continued.

The most muted reaction came from former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's opposition Pakistan Peoples Party.

"We are watching with caution the dialogue process and the professed efforts for normalisation of relations by General Musharraf," spokesman Farhatullah Babar told AFP.

"One has to wait and see the progress on the ground before making a judgment."

## 'Air-purifying machine' against Sars developed

AFP, Beijing

A Chinese company has developed an air-purifying machine that can kill the Sars virus with a near 100 per cent success rate, state media claimed yesterday.

The machine, developed by an unnamed south Chinese optical company, is designed for use in offices, homes and public spaces, the Xinhua news agency reported.

Government experts performed a one-month test of the device, which suggested it was up to 99.68 per cent effective in eliminating the Sars virus, Xinhua said.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome emerged in south China at the end of 2002 and eventually struck 32 countries, infecting some 8,000 people and killing close to 800 before subsiding in the summer.

China, which was worst hit with 349 fatalities and 5,327 infections, was declared Sars-free last July, although four new confirmed cases have been reported this winter.

## 'Pakistan, India's dialogue timetable a breakthrough'

AFP, Islamabad

An agreement between Pakistan and India on a timetable for dialogue was hailed as a breakthrough by analysts here who said it showed the nuclear rivals were serious about resolving their disputes.

The South Asia neighbours announced the dialogue, including key talks on the disputed region of Kashmir, at the end of a three-day meeting between their foreign secretaries Wednesday.

It was the first time the two countries had come out with a clear schedule for talks and a commitment to resolving outstanding disputes, analysts said.

"It's a breakthrough agreement," analyst Riffat Hussain said.

According to the schedule, the secretaries are to meet again in May or June for talks on Kashmir, followed by talks in July on seven other issues,

including terrorism and the Siachen glacier, another disputed area.

Technical-level meetings on border security, nuclear issues and drugs trafficking were also agreed on, as were meetings in August between the foreign secretaries and foreign ministers of both sides to review overall progress.

"Now there is a specific timeframe and there is a clear effort to have an early closure of the negotiations on some of the key issues," said Hussain, head of Quaid-e-Azam University's strategic studies department in Islamabad.

"There is sufficient basis for optimism because both sides will be pursuing the negotiations in a structured and organised manner," Hussain said.

"We will see an accelerated process on all tracks, which will ultimately force both countries to grapple with the thorny issue of

Kashmir.

"There will be talks on issues which are of lesser significance for Pakistan, but as long as there is a commencement of dialogue on the core issue of Kashmir, that's fine for Pakistan," he said.

For Pakistan, Kashmir is the root cause of decades of tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, who have fought two wars for the control of the Himalayan state since their independence from Britain in 1947.

The state is divided between India and Pakistan but claimed in entirety by both.

Soon after Wednesday's agreement, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf told an assembly of Muslim clerics that a peaceful solution of the Kashmir dispute was essential for peace in South Asia.



PHOTO: AFP

Young boys take advantage of the floods to earn money as they help a motorist through a submerged street in Jakarta yesterday. Hundreds of people in Jakarta left their flooded villages to seek refuge in local mosques after high floodwaters inundated their homes. Officials have said that several days of rain which have caused flooding in the capital and other cities will swell the number of dengue fever cases.

## 15 injured as bomb rips through holy Sikh city

AFP, Amritsar

At least 15 people were injured in a powerful bomb blast yesterday that caused widespread damage at a court complex in India's holy Sikh city of Amritsar, police and witnesses said.

The blast occurred near the office of police chief Kultar Singh, officials said, adding that the explosion was in an area containing items such as cars and stolen property seized by police and kept as evidence in ongoing trials.

"It was a powerful bomb," Singh told AFP as rescuers rushed the injured to hospitals.

He said most of the wounded had received shrapnel or burns injuries in the powerful explosion that shattered window panes in buildings in a 200-metre (660-foot) radius.

Amritsar in Punjab was the urban hub of an armed Sikh rebellion that claimed the lives of more than 25,000 people between 1983 and 1992 in the northern Indian state bordering Pakistan.

## Dengue deals double blow to Indonesia

### Death toll now 175

AFP, Jakarta

The death toll from Indonesia's dengue fever outbreak rose to 175 yesterday and a health official warned that floods beginning to inundate Jakarta and other cities would worsen the situation.

The "extraordinary" mosquito-borne outbreak has spread to four more provinces and infected 8,735 people in a total of 12 provinces since January 1, said health department spokesperson Dr. Mariani Reksoprojo.

Most of the cases are on Java island, where over half of Indonesia's 212 million people live. The number of infections is more than double those in the same period last year.

Reksoprojo said the death toll had risen to 175 Thursday morning. She said several days of rain, which has caused flooding in the capital and other cities will swell the number of dengue cases.

"It's clear it will worsen the situation," she said.

## 3 killed in new unrest in southern Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

Three people — including a police officer — were killed in a series of violent attacks in Muslim-majority southern Thailand, an intelligence official told AFP yesterday.

"Last night there were six attacks with three people killed and three injured," said the official, asking to remain anonymous.

The latest violence, which included the murder of a police officer in the town of Yarang in Pattani province, prompted the immediate closure of all 360 public and private schools in Pattani for at least two days.

The other two people killed were Muslim villagers and police said they were still investigating the exact circumstances of their deaths.



PHOTO: AFP

President of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Venkaiah Naidu (C) addresses media representatives as Hema Malini (L) and BJP senior party leader Pramod Mahajan (R) look on during a function at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. Many Indian celebrities including film actors and cricketers have recently joined the BJP as the party seeks to enhance its campaign for India's forthcoming general election.

## Bollywood 'Dream Girl' teams up with BJP

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalists yesterday accepted with open arms veteran Bollywood actress Hema Malini, as political rivals scrambled to enrol celebrities ahead of national elections.

The 55-year-old Malini said after joining the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that her husband, Dharmendra, who uses one name and is known for his he-man roles, would also throw in his lot with the BJP for the ballot, likely to be held April-end.

"I am joining the BJP as I feel very close to its ideology and also I have great admiration for (Prime Minister) Atal Behari Vajpayee," said Malini, who was nominated to parliament's upper house late last year.

Malini, dubbed Bollywood's "dream girl" for her good looks and preference for chaste film roles, said she had an open mind about contesting the elections to parliament's lower house.

## Asia urged to intensify war on bird flu

REUTERS, Bangkok

Health experts urged Asian countries yesterday to intensify the war on a deadly bird flu showing no signs of receding and threatening to evolve into a Sars-like epidemic.

The World Health Organisation said authorities were rushing to declare the disease ravaging their poultry flocks under control and said people were still at risk from the H5N1 virus that has claimed 22 lives in Asia. "We are in an emergency, urgency mode," Bjorn Melgaard, the WHO representative in Thailand, told regional health experts gathered in Bangkok to compare notes on fighting the virus.

"The bird epidemic is unfolding and continuing to spread at an unprecedented rate."

He reminded them that a year ago they faced an even deadlier epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) that killed more than 800 people before it was finally brought under control.

"We are again confronting yet

another emerging disease with the potential of causing a global epidemic," Melgaard said, adding that countries must not relax their surveillance and detection efforts.

"We would expect that we will see human cases in other countries that have the bird epidemic," he said.

Thailand and Vietnam, where all the human cases have been reported, have talked about declaring victory over the virulent H5N1 virus in a matter of weeks.

Thailand, which found recurrences of the disease in 14 areas this month, still says it expects to do so next month.

The Thai government, with an eye on the country's shattered \$1 billion-a-year poultry trade, is eager to resume exports and sent a high-level delegation to top-buyer Japan this week.

"If Japan, a country with a very high concern on health standards, agrees to re-import our chicken, it is very likely that other countries will follow," Deputy Prime Minister

Somkid Jatusripitak told reporters after returning from Tokyo.

In Vietnam, where 15 people have died and another human case was confirmed Friday, Premier Phan Van Khai urged officials not to let their guard down despite his earlier orders that the disease be brought under control this month.

Khai said they "must continue directing prevention efforts without allowing any early complacency among certain agencies, officials and residents," the state-run Vietnam news daily reported Friday.

Outbreaks have been reported in 57 of Vietnam's 64 provinces and 27 million birds have either died or been destroyed. Another 30 million birds have been slaughtered in Thailand.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation said it would be at least a year, perhaps never, before the virus was under control. And health experts say the risk of a human pandemic grows the longer the virus lingers.

## BJP to expose Cong 'misdeeds': Naidu

PTI, New Delhi

Lashing out at the Congress for launching 'India cheated campaign' against it, BJP yesterday said it would hit back by exposing that party's 'misdeeds' during 50 years of rule which "ruined" the country.

"Congress has cheated India for 50 years. It has ruined the country, brought down all standards in public life and halted growth and forward movement," party president M Venkaiah Naidu alleged at a press conference after Hema Malini formally joined BJP. He was reacting to Congress criticism of the NDA government's ad blitzkrieg on the eve of Lok Sabha polls and the party's launching of "India cheated campaign" to apprise people of how they are being told "lies" repeatedly on different issues confronting them.

"We will tell the people what Congress did in five decades and what the Vajpayee government has achieved in the last five years," Naidu said.

On the Congress charge that huge amounts were being spent on advertisements to "blow the

trumpet" of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, he said, "It is the right of the government, which is duly elected, to convey to the people its achievements. There is no mention of the name of the party, party functionaries or party symbols in the advertisements."

On the contrary, the BJP chief said the Congress government in Delhi has given several advertisements using tax payer's money and describing Sonia Gandhi as Leader of the Opposition.

Naidu said, "Instead of mentioning Gandhi in the ad, they should have mentioned the name of Jagdish Mukhi (BJP Leader of the Opposition in the Delhi assembly). They don't even know that the Lok Sabha stands dissolved and there is no Leader of Opposition." He said the Vajpayee government has not even spent one-tenth of money on ads as compared to that by Congress-ruled states collectively.

"This is the latest example of Congress cheating India," he said.

## Tamil Nadu BJP disappointed over seat-sharing

PTI, Chennai

Unhappy over non-allotment of some "favourable" Lok Sabha seats, including Pudukottai by the AIADMK, the BJP on Thursday expressed its disappointment over not getting Chennai (south), Sivaganga, Tiruchirappalli and Tenkasi.

"These are the seats, where we have done some ground work and expected the seats to be allotted to us. Party volunteers are unhappy over the non-allotment of these seats," BJP national secretary L Ganesan told reporters here yesterday.

He said the party workers had expressed their 'displeasure' over the non-allotment of some seats, considered to be favourable ones to the party.

"I do not want to hide the displeasure of our party members. We are unhappy particularly over the non-allotment of Pudukottai, now represented by the Union Minister S Thirunavukkarasu," he said.

Though the party did not get these seats, it would work for the victory of AIADMK front in all the 39 seats in the state, he said.

The allotment of seven seats including the Pondicherry seat had only showed that the party had grown in Tamil Nadu, Ganesan said adding that in 1998, the party had contested only five seats.

## Only peace can ensure functioning of Nepal's democracy: King

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's king said restoration of peace and security was key to the smooth functioning of democracy in the nation racked by a Maoist revolt but made no mention of when he might restore elected rule.

In a traditional message to the nation marking national democracy day, King Gyanendra said there was a need to end terrorism in the once peaceful tourist destination and called for political leaders to support such a drive.

"There is a broad consensus in the country that the democratic process can function smoothly only with the restoration of peace and security," he said.

But he was silent about when he might agree to pro-democracy campaigners' calls for restoration of the government he dismissed in 2002 or the creation of a new administration made up of five parties from the dissolved parliament.

The impoverished country,

which faces an increasingly deadly Maoist revolt has been rocked by protests for the past 18 months over the king's decision in 2002 to dismiss the elected government and install a loyalist prime minister.

"Peace and security are our national security and the Nepalese people's prime desire," Gyanendra said.

"Multi-party democracy can be consolidated only if a value system that has the highest regard for the people guided by their aspirations is upheld."

Gyanendra, vaulted to the throne in 2001 by the palace massacre of most of the royal family by a drunken crown prince, said democratic-minded people should view terrorism as an enemy of peace, democracy and humanity.

To mark national democracy day, the sentences of some 112 prisoners from various jails were commuted, a Home Ministry spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Movie star Susan Roces, wife of opposition presidential candidate and film star Fernando Poe join a protest by supporters of her husband in Manila yesterday as the Philippine Supreme Court began hearing a bid to exclude the "king" of the Philippine movies from running for president.

## Indian troops kill 4 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces shot dead four Kashmiri militants in two separate overnight encounters in the south of restive Indian Kashmir, a police spokesman said yesterday.

He said personnel from the Rashtriya (National) Rifles, a counter-insurgency wing of the Indian army, killed three militants during a gunfight in the woody Gadole area near the southern health resort of Kokernag, 70km south of the summer capital Srinagar.

"The fighting erupted when the army sealed off the area on a tip-off that militants were present there," the spokesman said, adding the fighting ended late Wednesday but the searches for more militants in the area continued.

Indian troops killed another militant near the southern highway town of Bijbehara overnight during a fierce encounter, police said.

"An Indian army major was injured during the gunbattle," the spokesman said.

He said the operations against militants would continue despite adverse weather conditions in the scenic Himalayan state, where thousands of people have died since the launch of an anti-Indian insurgency by rebels in 1989.