

6 SE Asian nations inch towards human trafficking pact

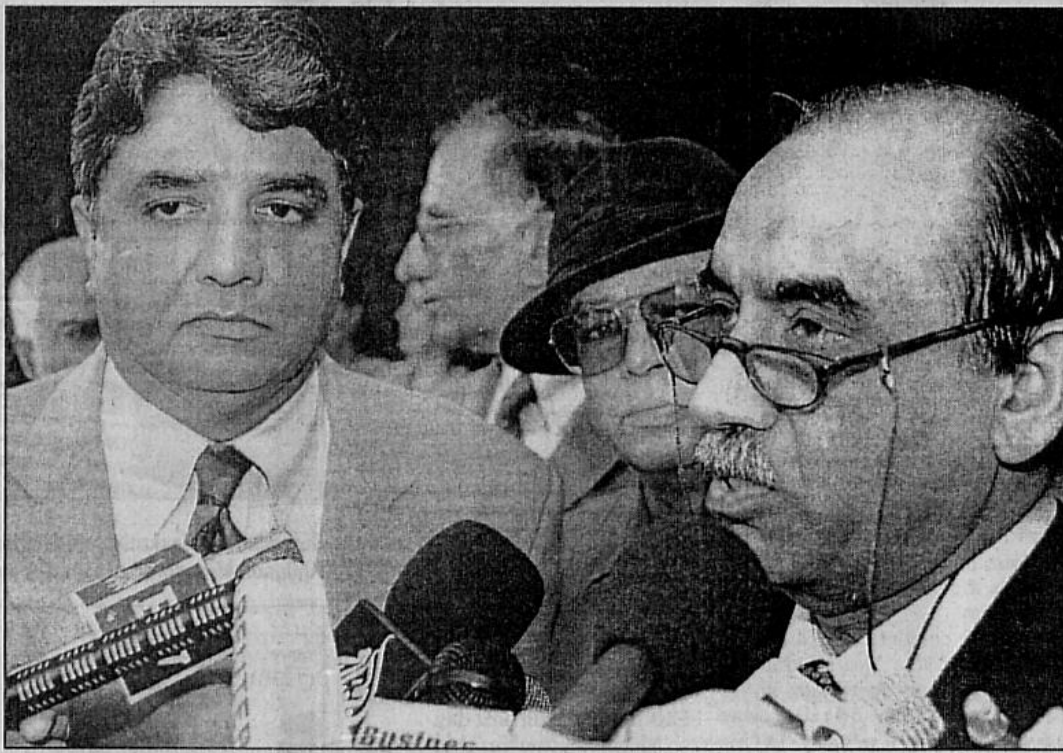
AFP, Bangkok

Senior officials from China and five Southeast Asian nations on Friday concluded their first-ever talks to thrash out a new framework for fighting human trafficking in the region.

United Nations officials cited substantial progress in the closed-door discussions aimed at hammering out the basics of an agreement expected to be signed between Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam when ministers meet in Yangon in October.

But they also warned that the battle against trafficking could actually be slowed by growing regional economic cooperation, the easing of customs procedures and the opening of transnational transport routes.

"The meeting was highly successful, and a number of tentative agreements have been reached which will be discussed further in the next step in the process," said Philip Robertson of UN inter-agency on human trafficking.



Secretary of India's Water Resource Ministry, V.K. Duggal (L) looks on as his Pakistani counterpart Ashfaq Mehmood (R) speaks to the media yesterday following a meeting in Islamabad. Pakistani and Indian officials concluded a 2-day meeting yesterday without any accord on water-sharing row triggered by New Delhi's decision to construct a dam in disputed Kashmir.

US to stand strong in Iraq despite killings

Powell holds talks with Iraqi leaders in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said yesterday that Washington was determined to stand strong in Iraq, bogged down in a worsening foreign hostage crisis and persistent clashes between US troops and insurgents.

"We are facing challenges in the weeks ahead, but we are determined to overcome (them)," Powell told reporters, flanked by President Ghazi al-Yawar, after talks with Iraqi and US officials in Baghdad.

The dovish secretary of state is the most senior US official to visit the country since the US-led occupation authority returned sovereignty to a caretaker government late last month.

"I reaffirm our determination and commitment to keep working with the interim government as they go about the process of establishing democracy on the basis of freedom

and human rights in Iraq," he said.

Powell paid tribute to the Iraqi government, lauding "the courage and determination they have shown in the face of adversity".

For his part, Yawar stressed that Baghdad was dealing with the United States as a sovereign partner and denied that recently appointed US ambassador John Negroponte was manipulating the government.

Iraq's caretaker administration has struggled to win popular support more than a month after the US-led coalition formally relinquished sovereignty, with many Iraqis seeing it as the product of the occupation.

"Ambassador Negroponte is working 100 percent as a diplomat, an ambassador of a superpower like any other US ambassador anywhere in the world," Yawar said.

Powell, a former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, paid his third visit to Iraq since the 2003 US-led

invasion as the country grapples with an escalating hostage crisis and chronic insecurity.

Just two days after a massive suicide bombing and a wave of attacks across the country left more than 120 people dead, Yawar said the insurgents were "getting more helpless and hopeless".

At least four explosions boomed across central Baghdad during Powell's meetings, one of which sounded when a mortar round hit a house, causing no casualties, said an AFP correspondent on the scene.

In Kufa, a stronghold of Shia Muslim radical leader Moqtada Sadr, two people were wounded at a bus station outside a hospital, said a source at the health centre.

Overnight, at least 13 people died when US troops battled insurgents in the flashpoint city of Fallujah, west of Baghdad, hospital sources and police said.

FRENCH LAWYER SAYS

Saddam trial to be 'judicial masquerade'

AFP, Paris

The trial of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein would be "a judicial masquerade," one of his French lawyers Andre Chamy said in an interview published yesterday in the regional daily L'Alsace.

"Saddam remains the legal president of Iraq and he is about to be tried in the framework of his functions, after he was arrested by the foreign occupation forces who invaded Iraq without any international legality," said Chamy, who joined Saddam's defence team -- 23 lawyers including three French -- in mid-July.

Chamy went on: "The Iraqi constitution only allows for trial of its president in one single case: high treason. Up to now, no one has abrogated the constitution. There is no parliament."

"For me, under international law, Saddam's arrest is void and the procedure against him is illegal. It is a judicial masquerade."

Indo-Pak water talks end without accord

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and India yesterday ended two days of talks without resolving a water sharing row triggered by New Delhi's decision to build a dam in disputed Kashmir, officials said.

A joint statement however said the two sides would meet again for further talks on the Wullar barrage but did not give any date.

It was agreed to settle the dispute according to the provision of the 1960 Indus Basin Treaty, which divides six rivers starting in or running through Indian-controlled part of Kashmir between India and Pakistan, it said.

"The discussions would continue at the next round of the dialogue process with a view to finding a solution to the issue

consistent with the provision of the treaty," the joint statement said.

The talks on Wullar are part of an eight-point agenda chalked out by the rival neighbours to resolve their disputes through a dialogue initiated earlier this year.

India started construction of the barrage, about 30 kilometers (19.5 miles) north of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, in 1985 but halted it two years later after objections raised by Pakistan.

The World Bank-guaranteed accord bars India from interfering with the flow of the three rivers feeding Pakistan -- Indus, Chenab and Jhelum -- but allows it to generate electricity from them.

Pakistan says the construction violates the Treaty and would affect the flow of the Jhelum river

water into Pakistan. India argues the project would in fact regulate the water flow and benefit Pakistan.

The Pakistani side in the talks was led by Secretary Water and Power Ashfaq Mehmood while the Indians were headed by Secretary Water Resource Ministry V.K. Duggal.

Both Mahmood and Duggal reported progress during the talks.

"The important thing is that the talks were held in an absolutely friendly and constructive manner," Duggal told a joint news conference with Mahmood.

"And both sides discussed each others' point of view. The observations were made and discussed with an open mind and it is not possible to reach conclusion on such technical observations immediately," he said.

al-Qaeda renews threat to Europe

AP, Dubai

Islamists claiming links to al-Qaeda issued another threat yesterday against European countries for supporting the policies of President Bush.

"We will not hesitate to shed blood in all parts of Europe, in Rome and other places, as long as countries move in the orbit of the pinnacle of unbelief, America," the statement by the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades said.

From here from Italy, from Britain, from Bulgaria and all European countries we call on all our units to prepare themselves to enter the battle," said the message, posted on an Internet Web site and dated July 30.

"You will not enjoy security while you remain in the shadow of the despicable Bush," it added. Bush faces an election battle in November to retain the US presidency.

The message made reference to a three-month truce issued to European states by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

China warns of war with Taiwan by 2008

REUTERS, Beijing

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian risks war with China if he pushes for a new constitution by 2008, but can guarantee security if he recognises the island as part of China, the China Daily on Friday quoted a top official assaying.

The island's security lies not in building up an arsenal of missiles and submarines but in offering assurances that Taiwan is not planning to declare independence, Vice Minister of the Taiwan Affairs Office Wang Zaixi told the newspaper.

Across the Taiwan Strait, the independence-leaning Chen for the first time commented on a proposed "unification law" the mainland government is considering that could provide the legal basis for attack, saying he was very concerned.

The volleys were the latest in the war of words between China and the democratic island it claims as a breakaway province to be recovered by force if necessary. Tensions have simmered since Chen's election in

March to a second four-year term.

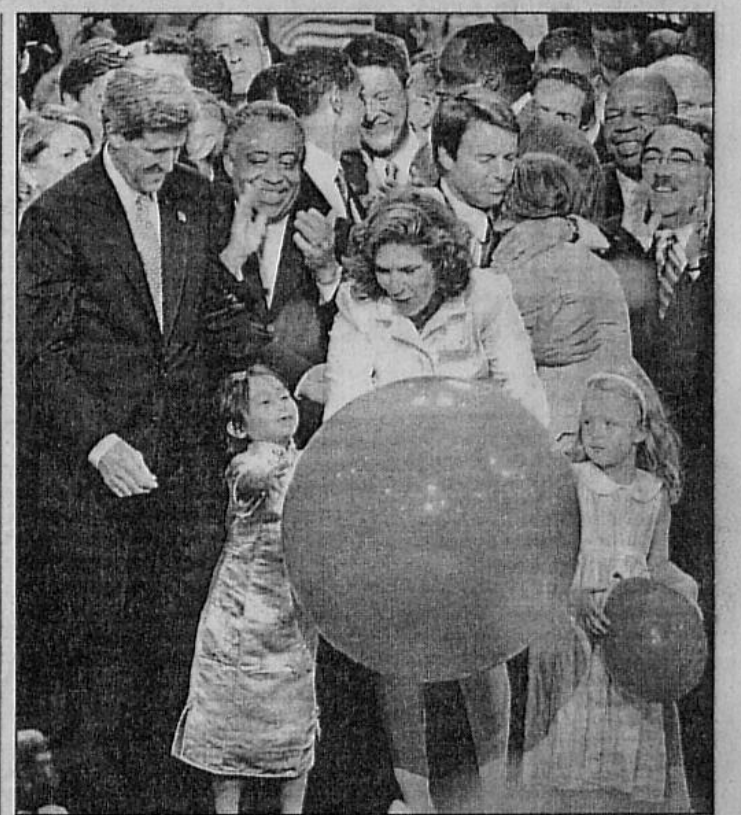
Beijing sees Chen's goal of adopting a new constitution by the end of his term in 2008 as a drive toward a formal declaration of independence, and has been preparing for a possible military showdown.

"New tensions and even a serious crisis in the cross-Straits situation may arise if Chen obstinately pursues his timetable," Wang told the China Daily.

The Taiwan leader took part in a rare submarine dive on Thursday to boost military morale days after arch-rival China completed a mock invasion of the island and to assure Washington of Taiwan's commitment to buying US weaponry.

The drill, following China's war games off the island, was intended to boost public support for a huge arms purchase deal with the United States that includes eight diesel-engine submarines, analysts said.

Tension between China and the United States over Taiwan has been rising recently.



Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry (L) and his wife Teresa Heinz Kerry play with a balloon Thursday at the closing of the Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts.



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) alongside Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawar (R), addresses the journalists at the Iraqi government headquarters in Baghdad yesterday. Powell said Washington was determined to overcome the "challenges" of Iraq and reaffirmed US support for the interim government after talks in Baghdad.

Saudis restore ties with Iraq

Bush lifts sanctions

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has restored relations with Iraq after a break of more than 13 years and agreed to cooperate on security, said a joint statement released here Thursday after a visit to the kingdom by Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

"The two sides have agreed to restore their diplomatic representation" and "develop their cooperation in the security field with an exchange of expertise," the statement said without elaborating.

Ties with Riyadh were broken off by then president Saddam Hussein's regime during the 1991 Gulf war when US-led multinational forces used Saudi Arabia as a springboard to free neighbouring Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.

Saudi Arabia also pledged to deliver on a promise first made late last year of one billion dollars in aid

for Iraq's reconstruction.

"Saudi Arabia reiterates its readiness to move forwards in the implementation of the programme it has already announced to support the reconstruction process in Iraq to the sum of one billion dollars," the statement said.

The pledge was first made at an international donors' conference in Madrid last year.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush on Thursday lifted sanctions placed on Iraq in 1990, when Iraq was run by Saddam Hussein, who was toppled last year by US-led troops.

"I have determined that the situations that gave rise to these national emergencies have been significantly altered by the removal of the regime of Saddam Hussein and other developments," Bush said in a statement. US-led forces toppled Saddam and occupied Iraq.

ANALYSTS SAY

Kerry strategy relies on anti-Bush feelings

AFP, Boston

John Kerry heads into his electoral battle with President George W. Bush with a simple strategy: make the poll a referendum on four years of Republican rule and shore up his credentials as a tough, capable alternative.

"The strategy is to let the anti-Bush sentiment come to Kerry and play off of that," American University presidential historian Alan Lichtman told AFP, following Kerry's keynote speech to the Democrats' national convention here.

"He is playing it safe. He solidified his base but did he need to? No," said David Corbin, political science professor at New Hampshire University.

"He began to sketch out an alter-

native vision but didn't quite go all the way. He gives you some tantalizing one liners about how a Kerry administration would be different, but not a comprehensive vision of an alternative way of governing," said Lichtman.

"He goes after Bush, (with the approach) 'you win because the incumbent is deficient and you can resolve those deficiencies,'" Lichtman added.

In his speech accepting the Democratic Party's nomination to run against Bush in the November 2 election, said the historian, the Massachusetts senator tried to counter criticism that he is weak on national security, lacks strong values and tends to waffle.

The Democrats' candidate pledged to restore "trust and credi-

bility" to the White House and repair global alliances rent by the Iraq war, in a speech that was rapturously received by the party faithful.

"A lot of the speech is defensive, designed to neutralize what he sees as the Republican lines of attack," Lichtman added, referring to the many instances Kerry explained how he would act in certain situations. "A lot of it is pre-emptively defensive."

But Kerry also went on the attack, scoring direct hits on his political adversaries using what Corbin described as "quiet animosity."

Kerry accused the Bush administration of harming the United States' image around the world, isolating the country from its allies and misleading Americans into an unnecessary war.

Sharon ties disarming WMDs to ME peace

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Thursday Israel would only reconsider the need for its "deterrent capability" when there is peace across the Middle East and its neighbors abandon weapons of mass destruction.

The Jewish state refuses to admit or deny it has nuclear weapons under a policy of "strategic ambiguity," but international experts estimate it has an arsenal of 100 to 200 warheads, making it one of the biggest atomic powers.

Sharon noted that longtime foe Libya had agreed to rid itself of weapons of mass destruction and Iran has come under international pressure to come clean on its atomic program.

"It could be that one day when we arrive at a comprehensive peace and everyone disarms completely, we will also be ready to consider taking steps," Sharon told a meeting of his right-wing Likud party in Tel Aviv.

But he said Israel still faced an "existential danger" from numerically superior regional enemies and that the United States, its main ally, had made clear the Jewish state "is not to be touched when it comes to its deterrent capability."

Aid groups slam draft UN plan on Sudan

AP, United Nations

Aid groups criticised a revised UN draft resolution that tempered a threat of sanctions against Sudan if the government doesn't act to stop atrocities in the western Darfur region.

The Security Council planned to vote Friday on the new draft, which deleted the word "sanctions" but kept the threat of economic action against the African nation unless it disarms Arab militias blamed for killing thousands of black African farmers.

Activists said the resolution wasn't tough enough and relied too much on the Sudanese government.

"Each step of the way it seems to be getting weaker and weaker," said Iain Levine of Human Rights Watch, which has accused the Arab-led government of supporting the militias a claim Sudan denies.

Janjaweed militias have killed up to 30,000 people in Darfur, most of them black Africans, and driven over 1 million from their homes in a 17-month conflict over dwindling resources.

The United States is hoping for

unanimous approval, arguing the final version of the resolution maintains the threat of sanctions if not the word. France, Spain, Britain, Chile, Germany and Romania agreed to co-sponsor the resolution, giving it a boost. But Pakistan, China and Russia say Sudan needs more time to stop the killings, rapes and pillaging.

"The initial draft included the word sanctions. It turns out that the use of that word is objectionable to certain members of the Security Council," US Ambassador John Danforth said. "They would rather use 'UN-speak' for exactly the same thing."

Officials from several delegations, speaking on condition of anonymity, but said they expect a minimum of nine "yes" votes, enough to avoid a veto. There are 15 nations on the Security Council.

The international debate came amid new reports of horror. According to an African Union monitoring team, militias "believed to be Janjaweed" chained civilians together and set them on fire earlier this month.

Karachi put on suicide bombing alert

REUTERS, Karachi

Security forces in Pakistan's volatile port city of Karachi have been put on high alert because of fears of suicide attacks by Islamic militants on mosques during Friday prayers.

Karachi police chief Tariq Jamil said intelligence agencies feared the banned extremist Sunni Muslim group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, was planning suicide bomb attacks on Shia mosques.

"The police are on high alert and we have deployed extra force around mosques and Imambarahs (Shia Muslim mosques) in the city," Jamil told Reuters.

The militant group might use women as suicide bombers in possible attacks, police and paramilitary were also checking vehicles for explosives, Jamil said.

In May, more than 60 people, mostly Shia Muslims, were killed and 150 wounded in suicide attacks on Shia mosques in Karachi.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is one of the most feared of Pakistan's underground militant groups and has links to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

The group has been implicated in attacks on Western targets in Karachi, including the kidnap and murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002.



Young Indian demonstrators carry placards as they stage a march demanding the release of the three Indian nationals held captive in Iraq by an Iraqi militant group yesterday in Kolkata, West Bengal. The families of three Indian hostages in Iraq appealed to New Delhi yesterday to act swiftly to save them as a deadline set by their kidnapers to kill one of the captives drew nearer.

Disease claims 30 lives in Assam

AFP, Nagaon

India's flood-ravaged northeastern state of Assam sounded a health alert yesterday after waterborne diseases killed 30 people, pushing the nationwide death toll to at least 697.

Thousands more had fallen ill in the outbreak but waters began receding across the region, officials said.

"There were at least 30 deaths in the past three to four days due to waterborne diseases, mainly diarrhoea and jaundice, breaking out in several flood-hit areas," an Assam health department official said.

"Up to 10,000 people are reported to be suffering from various ailments in relief camps," he said.

Hundreds of people were staying in makeshift shelters on highways and on raised platforms in eastern Assam's Nagaon district, about 130km from the state's main city of Guwahati.

"In the past three days six people died in this relief camp due to dysentery. Army doctors have set up medical camps here," said Tarini Baishya, a village elder in Nagaon district.

The region has been hit by floods, landslides and disease since flooding began mid-June with the countrywide toll touching at least 697. Assam alone accounts for at least 210 of the total casualties.

Neighbouring Bihar state said 452 people had been killed by floods there, with more than 21 million people displaced.

Some 12 million people have been uprooted in the devastating floods in the northeast, officials say.

"The entire health department is on maximum alert. This is a challenge for us with people now suffering from diseases. We've already fanned out medical teams across the state," Assam health minister Bhurnidhar Barman told AFP.

"The situation is really bad in some districts in western and northern Assam. Most have been taken ill after drinking muddy water," he said.

Health workers were distributing water purifying tablets and rushing medical teams in boats as well setting up mobile clinics.

The government statement said all 27 districts in Assam were hit by floods.