

Envoy visit N Korean mysterious blast site

BBC ONLINE

Diplomats from eight countries are visiting the site of a blast in North Korea last week, which was at first suspected of being a nuclear test.

Satellite photographs of the area showed a mushroom-shaped cloud.

But North Korea says the explosion was related to the construction of a dam - and the US and South Korea have accepted it was not nuclear.

South Korea's National Intelligence Service has said the cloud may in fact have been a natural formation.

The diplomats from Britain, the Czech Republic, Germany, India, Mongolia, Poland, Russia and Sweden left the North Korean capital by plane at 0800 (2300 GMT on Wednesday).

The group, which includes British Ambassador to North Korea David Slinn, could stay in the area where the blast occurred - near Yongji in Yanggang Province - until Friday.

Supporters of fox hunting storm British parliament

AFP, London

Supporters of fox hunting stormed Britain's parliament and clashed with police in the streets, but failed to stop lawmakers from voting by an overwhelming margin to ban the blood sport.

Debate was suspended for 30 minutes after five pro-hunt protesters, in the first incident of its kind in modern times, burst into the House of Commons chamber - the second dramatic security breach in London in three days.

"Clearly the intrusion was a carefully planned operation," said Commons speaker Michael Martin, adding that parliament was asking police to carry out a full investigation.

The five, wearing T-shirts depicting Prime Minister Tony Blair with devil's horns, were arrested - while outside, riot police with batons and tear gas kept back 10,000 furious pro-hunt demonstrators hurling bottles and fireworks.

At least 19 people were injured in the melee, including a police officer, while a total of seven people were arrested, the Metropolitan Police said.

Kerry trying to make polls a referendum on Bush

AP, Washington

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, trying to recover from a brass-knuckles campaign against his character, is attempting to steer the election to a referendum on President Bush's leadership.

Kerry has less than seven weeks to take over the lead in the presidential race. Democrats hope a major shift will come from the debates, but his strategy in the meantime is based less on building himself up than on tearing down the president.

Bush has enjoyed a lead of about 5 or 6 percentage points in national polls since the Republican National Convention, which portrayed Kerry as a vacillating opportunist. Democrats remained largely positive during their convention five weeks earlier, but now are trying to make the case that Bush has not been honest in his life and his leadership.

"It's time we had a president who tells the American people the truth," Kerry said in Ohio. "It's that simple."

Railway link to Nepal faces Maoist threat

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, Kolkata

The two-month-old rail link to Nepal from Kolkata Port has come under Maoist threat again and Indian Railway officials posted at Raxaul in Bihar are no less threatened.

Maoist rebels have threatened to blow up the terminal station in Raxaul, Bihar, located close to the Indo-Nepal border. The Maoist issued a similar threat in the last week of August.

The fresh threat to blow up the Raxaul terminal station came close on the heels of a threat issued by a Nepali labour union, the All Nepal Federation of Trade Unions, having links with the rebels, asking 35 firms including Indian joint venture companies in Nepal to shut down.

Despite the threat by the Maoist rebels, the movement of freight trains between the two countries has continued. In July, three rakes moved into Nepal from the port and the figure jumped to five rakes in August and two rakes so far in September.

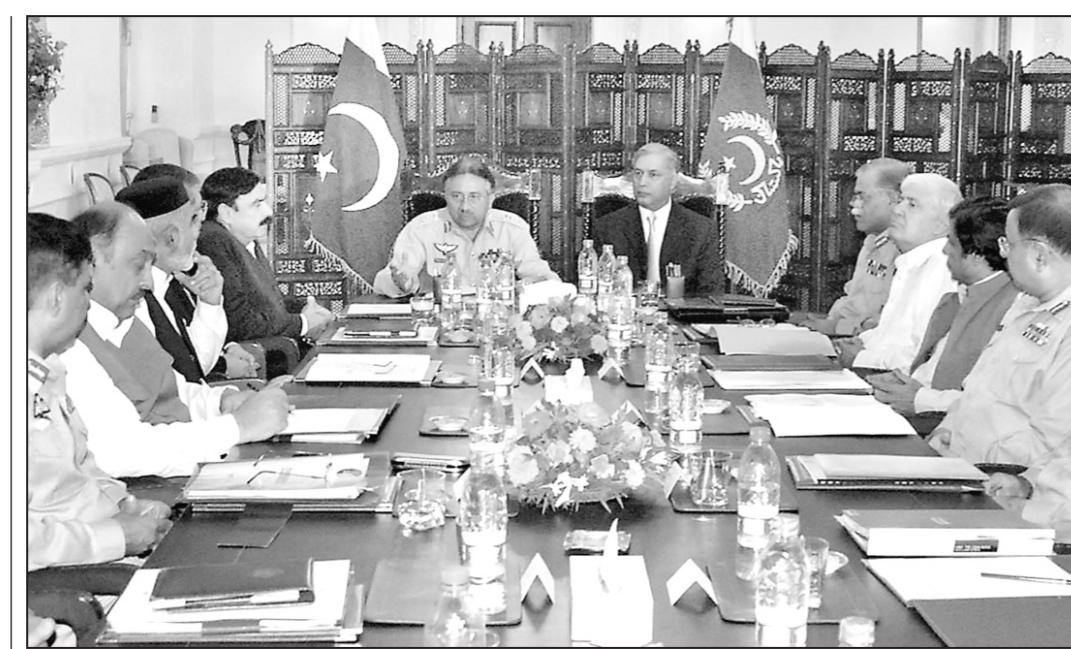


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (C-L) and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (C-R) chairing a meeting on law and order situation in Rawalpindi Wednesday. Musharraf will remain as the army chief, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid announced Wednesday, even though the general had pledged to relinquish the post this year.

Musharraf should keep his uniform: Pak PM

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz yesterday called for President Pervez Musharraf to stay as head of the army in the "national interest" despite his pledge to step down in December.

"In my opinion the president should remain in uniform in the national interest," state-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) quoted him as telling reporters here.

Aziz said the constitution did not bar Musharraf from holding the dual posts of president and army chief, and if needed the government would enact a law to legal technicalities, according to APP.

"There is no hitch in the constitution if the president opts so."

He said Musharraf would make a final decision himself.

"National interests are always supreme, and since it is in the larger interest of the country, everyone should support it," said Aziz, a close ally of Musharraf who became prime minister last month.

A cabinet minister had announced on Wednesday that Musharraf would not stand down as army chief but he later clarified that he meant to say he hoped the president would retain command of the armed forces.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid issued the clarification after he announced at a news conference that Musharraf had decided to remain in uniform.

"What I wanted to clarify is that it is not a decision taken by President Musharraf, it is our hope that he will accept the decision by the provincial assembly of Punjab," Rashid told APP.

Punjab's provincial legislature on Monday urged Musharraf not to step down as army chief by the end of the year, saying he should stay on to combat terrorism.

Opposition parties and rights groups believe it would be a blow to the nascent and fragile democratic process if Musharraf were to remain army chief.

Such a step would mean the military retaining its dominant role in the politics of Pakistan, which has been ruled for more than half of its 57 years by the military, they said.

A spokesman for former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) said it was evident from the announcements by Rashid that Musharraf would not stand down as army chief.

"A president holding the office of army chief is unconstitutional, illegal and a mockery of democracy," PPP spokesman senator Farhatullah

Babar told AFP.

"We will oppose it on all forums," Babar said.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, promised to relinquish his military role by this December under a deal with the six-party Islamic alliance of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).

Under the deal the MMA agreed to support a parliamentary vote to approve constitutional changes empowering the president to sack the government and to dissolve the elected parliament.

The Islamic parties had paralysed parliament for almost a year before the deal was reached.

Musharraf said last week "96 percent" of Pakistanis wanted him to abandon his pledge to become a civilian ruler, without giving a source for the figure.

The president, who believes he should stay in uniform to help with the fight against extremists, said he would make a decision based on the constitution, popular demand and national stability.

Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led war against terrorism, has deployed some 70,000 troops in the rugged tribal belt near the Afghan border to hunt down Al-Qaeda militants and their allies.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Asia tops US list of major violators

AFP, Washington

Asia dominated a US blacklist of alleged top religious freedom violators including China, North Korea, Myanmar and Vietnam, classified as "countries of particular concern" in the State Department's annual report on international religious freedom released Wednesday.

Other nations outside of the region and included on the list were Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Sudan and Iran.

The State Department categorizes countries of particular concern as governments "engaged in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedoms."

"The real issue is brutal treatment that religious believers face

there," says the report.

Vietnam was included for the first time, joining the other three Asian nations which have been on the list for several years, much to the chagrin of their governments.

Under US law, sanctions could be imposed on these countries, but Secretary of State Colin Powell said Washington would use diplomacy with China, Myanmar and Vietnam to prod them to change their policies.

"Let me emphasise that we will continue engaging the countries of particular concern with whom we have bilateral relationships," Powell told reporters.

The Chinese government was accused in the report of repressing Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims,

Catholics faithful to the Vatican, underground Protestants, and the Falungong sect.

Many religious believers in China are imprisoned for their faith, and others continue to face detention, beatings, torture and the destruction of places of worship.

US ambassador for religious freedom John Hanford said.

In Vietnam, at least 45 religious believers remain imprisoned, including members of the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai faiths, the report said.

The report said Myanmar's military regime "systemically" restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom and discouraged or prohibited minority religions from

constructing new places of worship.

The report also kept China, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea and Vietnam together with Cuba on the list of "totalitarian regimes" restricting religious freedom, saying they regarded religious groups as enemies of the state.

Pakistan was included in a list of countries with "state hostility towards minority or non-approved religions" while Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka were categorized as those with "state neglect of societal discrimination against, or persecution of, minority religions."

Brunei and Malaysia were among countries with "discriminatory legislation or policies prejudicial to certain religions."

3 American bounty hunters jailed for running pvt prison

REUTERS, Kabul

Three Americans have been sentenced to up to 10 years in jail after being found guilty by an Afghan court on charges including torture, running a private prison and illegal detention.

Jonathan "Jack" Idema, a former US Green Beret, was arrested in July along with another ex-serviceman, Brent Bennett, and documentary film-maker Edward Caraballo.

They had denied the charges and insisted they were in Afghanistan with US and Afghan government sanction to help track down al-Qaeda and Taliban extremists.

"I apologize that we tried to save these people," Idema told reporters immediately after the verdict.

"We should have let the Taliban murder every ... one of them," he said bitterly.

Idema and Bennett were each sentenced to 10 years in jail and Caraballo to eight. Four Afghan co-defendants received sentences ranging from one to five years.



PHOTO: AFP

Irqi children peer over the gate of their home to catch a glance of journalists gathering in front of the house where two Americans and a Briton were abducted early yesterday in the Mansur district of Baghdad.

US intelligence paints gloomy picture of Iraq

REUTERS, New York

US intelligence officials prepared a report for President Bush in late July presenting a gloomy outlook for Iraq, saying that at worst the country might descend into civil war, The New York Times said yesterday.

The IAEA knew about Parchin but didn't include it in the report," the US official said, referring to IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei's latest paper on the Iranian nuclear programme.

ElBaradei said on Monday he was not convinced Iran's activities were entirely peaceful, but that there was no hard evidence to prove the US belief that Tehran was using an atomic bomb programme.

"This clearly shows the intention to develop weapons," a senior US official told Reuters.

A top Iranian official said the charge that Tehran was hiding an atomic site from UN inspectors was a "carefully timed lie" intended to influence a resolution on its nuclear program being discussed at this week's meeting of the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"This is a new lie, like the last 13 lies based on news reports that have been proved to be lies," Hossein Mousavian, Iran's chief delegate to the IAEA board meeting told Reuters.

David Albright, a former weapons inspector who heads the

chief George Tenet, who stepped down in July. The conclusions were reached before the recent worsening of Iraq's security situation.

"There's a significant amount of pessimism," one government official who read the document, which runs about 50 pages, told the Times.

The officials who reviewed the estimate included critics and supporters of Bush's policies in Iraq. They declined to discuss the estimate's key conclusions, the newspaper said.

The new estimate revises issues raised by the intelligence council in less formal assessments in January 2003, the newspaper said, citing the officials. One intelligence document from that time warned that building a democracy in Iraq would be a long and difficult prospect that might include internal conflict, the newspaper said, citing a government official.

Bush has in recent months

consistently emphasised progress in Iraq while acknowledging difficulties, the newspaper said, and the tone of the new estimate contrasts with recent statements by his administration.

"You know, every step of the way in Iraq there have been pessimists and hand-wringers who said it can't be done," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said at a Wednesday news briefing. "And every step of the way, the Iraqi leadership and the Iraqi people have proven them wrong because they are determined to have a free and peaceful future."

Bush's opponent in his race for re-election, Democratic Sen. John Kerry, on Wednesday criticised the administration's public position on Iraq. In a phone call to radio talk show host Don Imus, Kerry questioned whether it is possible to hold elections there in January.



PHOTO: AFP

Waves and wind smash a dock as the first bands of Hurricane Ivan lash the Alabama shores giving the few residents who did not evacuate the coastal areas a first taste of the killer storm's fury.

Darfur rebels still hope for peace

AFP, Abuja

Darfur's rebel Sudan Liberation Movement insisted yesterday that African Union-brokered peace talks have not broken down irretrievably, as mediators confirmed that the two rebel groups were still in consultations to restore peace.

"We do not think the negotiations have failed and we are ready to continue the negotiations," said Abdjabbar Dofa on behalf of the SLM.

The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the other rebel group involved in the talks which began three weeks ago but have struggled to make any progress, on Wednesday told AFP that the negotiations with the Khartoum government had collapsed.

Mohammed Ahmed Tugod, the chief negotiator for the JEM said: "The negotiations have collapsed already because there are differences, strong differences between us and the Sudanese government."

Hurricane Ivan slams US Gulf Coast

12 people killed

AP, Gulf Shores

Hurricane Ivan slammed ashore early yesterday with winds of 130 mph, packing deadly tornadoes and a powerful punch of waves and rain that threatened to swamp communities from Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle. At least 12 deaths were blamed on the storm.

For the millions of Gulf Coast residents who spent a frightening night in shelters and boarded-up homes, the worst could be yet to come: up to 15 inches of rain were expected as Ivan moved inland.

"Say a prayer, say a prayer, that I'll have some place to go when I leave here," evacuee Betty Sigler said in a Mobile shelter, safe from the howling wind and sheets of rain. "We'll see in the morning."

The storm weakened as it moved inland, but remained a Category 1

hurricane with winds of 80 mph more than four hours after landfall.

Ivan knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of people, toppled trees, ripped off roofs and sent street signs hurtling through the night. In the beach resort town of Gulf Shores, where the storm's eye blew ashore, the sky had a bright green glow as electrical transformers blew.

"We have never seen a hurricane of this size come into Alabama," said Gov. Bob Riley, who earlier asked President Bush to declare much of the state a disaster area, a request that was granted.

Two people were killed and more than 200 homes were damaged when at least five tornadoes roared through Florida's Bay County. Five people were killed when another tornado struck homes in Blountstown, Fla., and an 8-year-