

Envoys 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 Yongjo-ri 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.

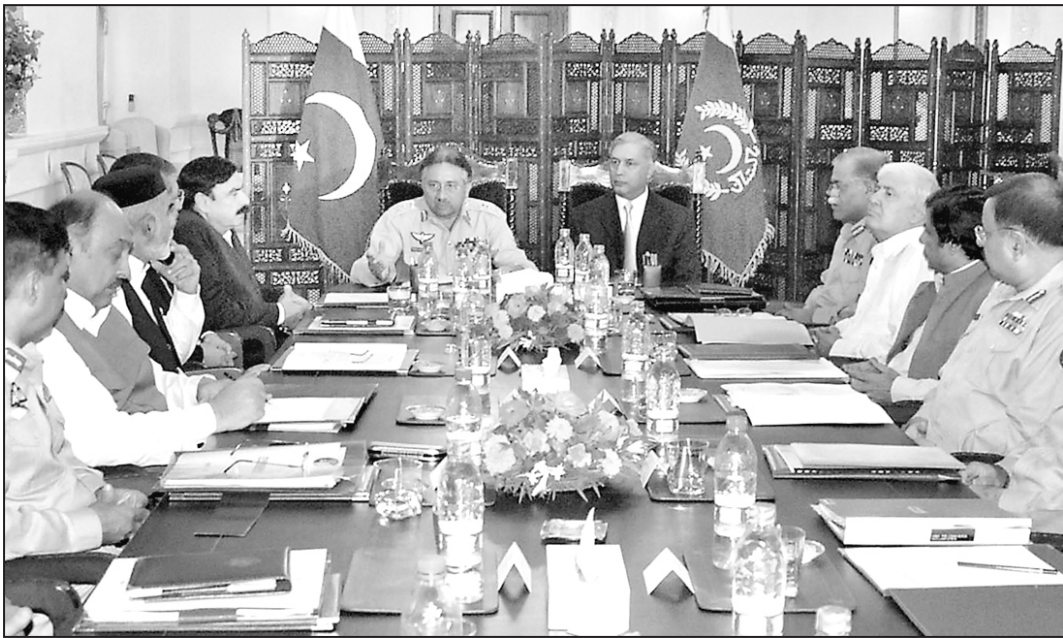


PHOTO: AFP

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 meet 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 AFP.

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 shed his uniform.

"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 categorises 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 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 categorised 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."

Putin rules out
talks with
Chechen
rebels

AFP, Astana

Russian President Vladimir Putin ruled out yesterday the possibility of negotiating with Chechen rebels following the Beslan school hostage crisis that killed at least 339 people, half of them kids.

"Naturally the atrocities we encountered in Beslan gave us the complete moral right to insist that the people who orchestrated them are a part of the terrorist internationale," Putin said during a regional summit in Kazakhstan.

"There's no point in talking to (Osama) bin Laden," he said, referring to the head of the al-Qaeda terror network. "Bin Laden has twice offered Europe negotiations and no one thinks of negotiating with him."

In the wake of the Beslan crisis, which Moscow links to separatists from Chechnya, Putin announced a major overhaul of the Russian administration this week to hand the Kremlin sweeping new powers.

The move, which will end the direct election of regional governors, replacing them with Kremlin appointees, has been criticized by Washington and the European Union.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi children peep 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.

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

Mourners carry the body of an unidentified Palestinian killed during an Israeli army raid yesterday in the West Bank city of Nablus. Ten Palestinians, including a young schoolgirl, were killed Wednesday in separate army raids in the West Bank as Israel tightened security for the beginning of the Jewish New Year holiday.

Suspect site in Iran shows
its nuke goal: US

REUTERS, Vienna

A senior US official said yesterday that satellite photos of a suspected nuclear site in Iran demonstrated its intention to develop atomic weapons, an allegation Tehran dismissed as "a new lie."

A prominent nuclear expert said on Wednesday that new satellite images showed the Parchin military complex southeast of Tehran may be a site for research, testing and production of nuclear weapons. Iran denies having 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

Institute for Science and International Security think tank, said the IAEA had asked to inspect Parchin but had been ignored.

But Mousavian said: "They have not asked to see the site."

The IAEA declined to comment, but Western diplomats familiar with the talks said Parchin was not a new site for inspectors.

"The IAEA knew about Parchin but didn't include it 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 its nuclear power program as a front to build an atom bomb.

Western intelligence agencies have recognized Parchin as a potential chemical, explosives and munitions production site since the 1990s. In November 2003 a Tehran parliamentarian complained publicly too much money was being spent on atomic technology and identified Parchin as a site for such activity.

David Albright, a former weapons inspector who heads the



PHOTO: AFP

Waves and wind smash a dock as the first bands of Hurricane Ivan make landfall in Port Alabama, AL, south of Mobile Wednesday. The first bands of Hurricane Ivan lashed 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 Abduljabbar Dafa 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."