

Hu replaces Jiang as China military chief

REUTERS, Beijing

Former president Jiang Zemin gave up the top job in China's military yesterday, handing over his last post to Communist Party chief Hu Jintao to complete a historic leadership transition to a younger generation.

The party's Central Committee accepted the resignation of the 78-year-old Jiang on the final day of a four-day closed-door plenum and approved Hu's rise to chairman of the party's Central Military Commission, the official Xinhua news agency said.

Hu, 61, who replaced Jiang as party chief in 2002 and as president in 2003, now holds the three most powerful positions in China after taking the military portfolio, completing the first orderly succession in Chinese Communist history.

"The Hu Jintao era has started," said a Chinese political analyst who asked not to be identified.

In a sign Jiang's influence is already waning, his closest political ally, Vice President Zeng Qinghong, did not join the military commission. Xu Caihou, 61, a member of the

military commission, was promoted as a vice-chairman, Xinhua said.

Jiang's departure was unlikely to result in dramatic changes to domestic, foreign and economic policies with Hu set to pursue reforms that have transformed China into the world's seventh-largest economy while cooling breakneck growth.

The hydraulic engineer was almost certain not to stray from Jiang's tough stand on using force to recover the island of Taiwan if it moves formally to declare independence.

Xinhua gave no reason for Jiang's retirement, but a source close to his family said he was in poor health. Jiang has had a heart problem since as early as 1989, said sources with ties to party leadership circles.

"Now that Hu takes over the top job, people will want to know how well he can strike a balance between easing China-Taiwan tensions, sustaining economic growth and maintaining China-US relations, particularly when there might be a new US president following November's election," said James Sung, principal lecturer at City University of Hong Kong.



Two Sudanese girls arrive from collecting firewood to the Internally Displaced Camp of Krinding in the western town of El-Geneina in Darfur close to the border with Chad Saturday. Rebel and government delegates to African Union-sponsored talks on restoring peace to Sudan's western Darfur region started returning to their bases after the negotiations were adjourned for one month.

UN threatens sanctions against Sudan

'Gates of hell will open if West intervenes'

AP, AFP, United Nations

A divided UN Security Council approved a resolution Saturday threatening oil sanctions against Sudan unless the government reins in Arab militias blamed for a killing spree in Darfur and ordered an investigation of whether the attacks constitute genocide.

The vote was 11-0 with four abstentions: China, Russia, Pakistan and Algeria.

China, a permanent council member, said immediately after the vote that it would veto any future resolution that sought to impose sanctions on Sudan.

"I told the American government that the position of my government on sanctions is a firm one," said China's UN Ambassador Wang Guangya. "We always believe that sanctions is not a helpful means to achieve political objectives. It will

only make matters worse."

The resolution says the council would have to meet again to consider sanctions against Sudan's petroleum sector or other punitive measures if the government doesn't act quickly to stop the violence and bring the perpetrators to justice or if it doesn't cooperate with an African Union monitoring force.

US Ambassador John Danforth called the Darfur crisis "uniquely grave."

"The disaster in Darfur is entirely man-made. ... It was fabricated by a government as an overreaction to a rebellion; a government intent on revenge, intent on persecution, intent on breaking the spirit of an entire people," he said.

The resolution strongly endorses the deployment of a beefed-up African Union force with an expanded monitoring mission that

would actively try to prevent attacks and mediate to stop the conflict from escalating. More than 50,000 people have already died and over 1.2 million have fled their homes to escape the violence.

Meanwhile, the speaker of the Sudanese parliament yesterday warned the West against intervening in his country, saying it would open the "gates of hell."

"If Iraq opened for the West one gate of hell, we will open seven such gates," Ibrahim Ahmed al-Tajer was quoted as saying after the UN Security Council adopted a new resolution calling on Khartoum to restore security in strife-torn Darfur or risk possible sanctions.

"We will not surrender this country to anybody," Tajer was quoted as saying in Darfur by the Sudanese Media Center, an information outlet affiliated to the government.

Pakistan claims winning terror battle in tribal belt

AFP, Wana

Pakistan says it has Islamic militants in the rugged tribal belt bordering Afghanistan on the run after a protracted and hard-fought military campaign.

The assurances follow bloody sieges in March and June, which were heavily criticised for their high military death toll.

"I think that the operations in June and July, they were the watershed and we are now certainly downhill," military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told journalists invited to South Waziristan.

"It is still difficult to predict when this will be over, but we are certainly over the watershed now," he said, adding that the fighters "can be eliminated ... very quickly."

In March, Pakistani troops made their first ever forays into the semi-autonomous areas since the beginning of 2002, inciting outrage among local leaders and Islamist

politicians as they hunted al-Qaeda-linked militants believed to have fled neighbouring Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.

Thousands of troops besieged a mud fortress for 12 days in March, an incident which ended with the escape of an unknown number "high-value" targets and more than 60 troops dead.

A similar onslaught in June ended with 65 militants and 18 Pakistani forces dead.

The military spokesman said the forces of Pakistan, a staunch US ally in the "war on terror", had systematically searched out and destroyed the militants' hiding places and bases, limiting their ability to operate.

"It is certain that the space for the miscreants has been shrunk and most of the area of Waziristan ... has been secured by the security forces," he said.

South Waziristan borders Afghanistan's insurgency-hit southeast province of Paktika, where Taliban remnants and other militants have been

killing aid agency staff, troops and civil workers for more than a year.

Officials suspect some 600-700 al-Qaeda followers remain in the tribal belt after leaving Afghanistan when the fundamentalist Taliban regime collapsed in late 2001.

"Around 150 foreign fighters have been killed in the tribal areas since last October," Sultan said.

"Miscreants are not freely able to operate in this area, however they can sneak in discreetly and may put some explosive on the roadside or fire one odd rocket, but their free activity, their strong bases ... have been routed."

Foreign and local journalists have been taken to the picturesque Shakai valley, the scene of the June operation. Troops say this is where they uncovered a cellar in one of the destroyed hideouts containing computers, weapons, ammunition and documents including the passport of a Jordanian national, Abdullah Khalid Mohammad.

IAEA inspectors in S Korea for investigation

REUTERS, Seoul

Inspectors from the UN nuclear watchdog arrived in Seoul yesterday to conduct a second inspection of South Korea's nuclear experiments, a day after the South said it had no plans to develop or possess nuclear weapons.

The five-member delegation is to scrutinise the main nuclear laboratory in the central city of Taejeon on Monday and to take a second look at 294 pounds of natural uranium metal, Yonhap news agency and officials have said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) first tested the material this month.

The issue prompted North Korea on Saturday to say it would never dismantle its nuclear arsenal and would not resume talks on its atomic programs unless the United States dropped its "hostile" policy, the North's official KCNA news agency said.

US troops threaten Ramadi offensive

Iraqis start fleeing homes, Blair holds talks with Allawi

AFP, Ramadi

US marines drove through central Ramadi yesterday ordering "terrorists" to surrender or face a crushing assault within hours, as panicked Iraqis began to flee the lawless Sunni Muslim city, an AFP correspondent said.

US marines patrolled through the centre of Ramadi, the provincial capital of the violence-ridden Al-Anbar province, using loudspeakers to order all "terrorists" to surrender by 4:00 pm (1200 GMT) or face an assault.

Panicked residents began packing up bare essentials from their homes, before walking and driving away from the city.

Late Saturday, US marines massed in the centre of the city, west of Baghdad, where rebel gunmen patrolled the streets and clashes had earlier killed a policeman, a doctor said.

In the early hours of Saturday, marines had carried out a major offensive called Operation Hurricane II to hunt for illegal weapons and ammunition and to disrupt a "terrorist network," the military said in a statement.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was hosting talks with Iraqi counterpart Iyad Allawi here yesterday against the backdrop of the kidnapping of a British engineer in Baghdad and concern about whether Iraqi elections can go ahead in January.

"It is the first time they would have met, certainly with Allawi as prime minister," a spokesman for Blair's office told AFP as the talks began.

"They will talk about the security situation in Iraq and the progress of the political process in the run-up to elections."



Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) and Iraqi interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi arrives for a meeting at No.10 Downing street in London yesterday. Blair is hosting talks with Allawi against the backdrop of the kidnapping of a British engineer in Baghdad.



PHOTO: AFP

President candidate former General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono gestures as he speaks during a press conference before a mass prayer at his residence in Cibubur, West Java yesterday. Soft-spoken and telegenic, retired general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has emerged as a leading force in Indonesia's political battlefield presenting a challenge to his former boss President Megawati Sukarnoputri in today's presidential polls.

PRESIDENTIAL RUNOFF Indonesians to cast their votes today

THE JAKARTA POST/ANN, Jakarta

Indonesia is putting the finishing touches on preparations for the historic presidential election runoff today, and the country appears ready for the polls despite some minor glitches.

The excitement was already building on Sunday, with residents of neighborhood units around the country erecting polling stations.

There was a slight increase in the number of passengers at Pulogadung bus terminal in North Jakarta, as people returned to their hometowns to cast their votes.

The government has announced that today is a national holiday, to give all eligible voters a chance to make it to the polls. At least 153 million people have registered for the runoff, which will pit Megawati Soekarnoputri against Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

General Elections Commission (KPU) member Anas Urbaningrum, said on Saturday election materials had reached all 567,000 polling stations across the country. "Everything is ready. We are now

waiting for the vote on Monday," Anas said.

The polls are expected to close at 1 p.m. on Monday, although it is possible that individual polling stations will close earlier if all of the voters registered with the stations in question have already cast their votes.

In the South Sulawesi capital of Makassar, local KPU head Aidir Amin Daud promised the voting on Monday would take place without incident despite a threat from some poll committee members to go on strike for more money.

"God willing, the vote will run smoothly. All of the materials such as ballot papers, ink and forms have arrived at all of the polling stations," he said.

He said budget constraints prevented his office from paying poll committee members more money. He added that the governor had ordered regents and mayors to assist the KPU should the strike take place.

The local KPU in Riau also said it had completed the preparations for Monday's polls, including paying poll committee members.

Bush vulnerable to Kerry among independent voters

REUTERS, Kennebunkport

President Bush, who holds a sizable lead in some polls, still appears to be vulnerable to Democrat John Kerry among independent voters whose shifting loyalties could determine the winner of the November election, pollsters say.

Polling results from the Pew Research Center, the Christian Science Monitor and the Gallup Organisation suggest independent voters are favoring Kerry as concerns about the economy and Iraq re-emerge as top campaign issues, despite a surge of support for Bush following the Republican convention.

"At this point, it seems that Kerry's doing slightly better than Bush among independents," said Jeff Jones, managing editor of the Gallup Poll.

A new Gallup survey released on Friday showed the Democratic presidential nominee leading Bush 50-43 percent among independents, even though the Republican incumbent held a 13-percentage-point lead among voters overall.

Iran, Iraq restore full ties after 24-yr

AFP, Tehran

An Iraqi ambassador took up his post in the Iranian capital on Saturday, restoring full ties 24 years after the two countries went to war, the state news agency IRNA reported.

As Iran and Iraq raised diplomatic ties to the level of ambassadors, Mohammad Majid al-Sheikh presented his credentials to Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi, it said.

Sheikh is a member of the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shia group that was based in Tehran during the rule of president Saddam Hussein, whose country waged a 1980-1988 war against Iran.

In his meeting with Kharazi, Sheikh underlined the "political, historical and cultural commonalities of the two countries and stressed the need for making use of them to put the two neighbours' bitter past behind them", according to IRNA.

It is unclear when Iran will name its ambassador to Baghdad,

upgrading relations from the level of charge d'affaires.

Relations between the two Muslim neighbours have improved dramatically since the April 2003 fall of Saddam, but a full normalisation has been complicated by the US occupation of Iraq that is fiercely opposed by Tehran.

Iran, which has yet to sign a formal peace treaty with Iraq, gave only a cool recognition of the interim Iraqi government formed in June, saying it was at the command of Washington, whose ties with Tehran were severed in 1980.

In August, Iraqi Defence Minister Hazem Shaalan said the Shia rebels behind a deadly anti-coalition uprising in central and southern Iraq were receiving weapons from across the borders with Shia Iran.

And the minister charged in press interviews in July that Iran was his country's "first enemy" and Baghdad had seen "clear interference in Iraq by Iran" in order "to kill democracy."

Myanmar removes FM in cabinet shake-up

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military regime reshuffled its cabinet Saturday, removing three long-serving members including the foreign minister, according to state-run media.

Foreign Minister Win Aung and his deputy Khin Maung Win were "permitted to retire" and were replaced by men with military backgrounds and no major experience in government.

The changes at the foreign ministry come as Myanmar faces strong criticism on the world stage over the coming weeks at the United Nations general assembly and at a gathering in October of the European Union and Southeast Asian nations.

Myanmar, isolated politically and subject to international sanctions, is regularly condemned by chief critics the US and Europe over its human rights record and lack of political freedoms.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) greets Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (L) as Cabinet ministers look on during a ceremony at Singh's residence prior to his departure for the US and Britain, in New Delhi yesterday.