

IAEA calls for nuke-free zone in Middle East

N Korea asked to allow inspection

AFP, Vienna

The UN atomic agency called Friday for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, in a move clearly aimed at Israel, which is believed to be the only state in the region with atomic weapons.

The resolution at the International Atomic Energy Agency, presented by Egypt and adopted by consensus, "affirms the urgent need for all states in the Middle East to forthwith accept the application of full-scope agency safeguards to all their nuclear activities... as a step in enhancing peace and security in the context of the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone."

The resolution did not specifically mention Israel, which neither confirms nor denies that it has atomic weapons and is the only state in the region which has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which sets safeguards that are monitored by the IAEA.

Israel is believed to have up to 200 nuclear weapons.

The resolution said the 140-member IAEA was "concerned by the grave consequence, endangering peace and security, of the presence in the Middle East regions of nuclear activities not wholly devoted to peaceful purposes."

The UN nuclear watchdog wrapped up a week-long general conference yesterday, with Arab states criticising Israel for allegedly having nuclear weapons but refusing to agree to international atomic safeguards.

The 137-nation conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency also adopted a resolution calling for IAEA inspectors to return to North Korea to monitor nuclear activities there, after its inspectors were kicked out of the country in December 2002.

It "calls upon" North Korea "to promptly accept comprehensive IAEA safeguards and cooperate with the agency in their full and effective implementation."

The IAEA had reported North Korea in February 2003 for non-compliance with the nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that sets the safeguards for the IAEA to enforce and had passed a similar resolution on North Korea at its general conference last year. Also on the agenda at this year's conference was a resolution on fighting "nuclear and radiological terrorism."

The anti-nuclear terrorism resolution continues from others adopted by the IAEA since the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001.

The goal is to "provide advice and training to member states on where their vulnerabilities are, how to beef up security on their borders and how to stop illicit trafficking," IAEA spokesman Mark Gwozdecky said.

The Israeli-related debate was the second-to-last item on the agenda for the conference but the Israeli delegation was hoping for it to be moved up so it could be wrapped up in the early afternoon since the Jewish Yom Kippur festival, the holiest day in the Jewish year, begins at sundown.

Thai govt offers truce to Muslim militants in south

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand backed down from a planned tough offensive against southern Muslim separatists Friday, offering militants a ceasefire to the violence which has claimed more than 310 lives this year.

Thai Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh called on militants to accept a ceasefire beginning at the start of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, which falls around October 16.

"I propose that on the first day of Ramadan both the government and Muslim militants cease all hostilities, with the possibility of militants contacting the government for negotiations," Chavalit told Muslim religious teachers gathered in Bangkok.

Chavalit, who oversees national security, had on Tuesday vowed to launch a decisive strike against militants after a judge was shot dead in the restive southern province of Pattani.

But in an apparent U-turn Friday he acknowledged that a retaliatory policy by Thai security forces was not leading towards a peaceful settlement in the south.

Top Indian nuke scientist Raja Ramanna dead

PTI, Mumbai

Eminent scientist and doyen of India's nuclear programme, Dr Raja Ramanna, died of an intestinal problem in a hospital in Mumbai at the age of 79.

Ramanna, who played a key role in the country's first Pokhran nuclear test in 1974, breathed his last at 03.15 am in Bombay Hospital, Dr BK Goyal, Dean of the Hospital, said.

Last night, Ramanna's daughter-in-law and his Personal Assistant Ramakrishna said the scientist had passed away at around 7.30 pm. Soon after, Dr Goyal said the scientist was alive but his condition was "very very critical."

Ramanna, who is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son, was admitted to the hospital on Monday after he complained of giddiness and sweating.

A multi-faceted personality, Ramanna was Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Director of Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, a former Union Minister and a member of the Rajya Sabha. A recipient of Padmashri, Padma Bhun and Padma Vibhushan awards, Ramanna was the Director Emeritus of the Bangalore-based National Institute of Advanced Studies.

India, Pakistan face 'serious outstanding issues': Powell

AFP, New York

India and Pakistan have to confront "serious outstanding issues" in efforts to improve ties, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday, ahead of crucial talks between leaders of the nuclear-armed neighbours.

"We do now have a dialogue," Powell told reporters. "We know that there are serious outstanding issues that have to be dealt with as part of this dialogue."

India's new prime minister Manmohan Singh is scheduled to meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Friday on the fringes of the annual UN General Assembly in New York, with the raging issue of Kashmir expected to top the agenda.

The talks could give an impetus to the nations' slow-moving eight-month peace process, but a solution on Kashmir may remain distant.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi boy holds up pictures of victims of US assaults prior to a joint Shia and Sunni Juma (Friday) prayers outside the Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad yesterday. Sunni Muslim scholars called on people to attend Friday prayers outside the infamous detention center to protest against US atrocities in Iraq. Shia Muslims also joined the gathering.

Support for expansion of UNSC increases

BBC ONLINE

Support is growing at the UN for a joint bid by four influential countries to increase the number of members of the Security Council.

Germany, Brazil, India and Japan are seeking permanent seats on the council for themselves and one African nation.

France and Britain, two permanent council members, backed the move at the General Assembly - although Italy expressed its opposition.

France also restated its disapproval of the invasion of Iraq.

French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier told the meeting his country would not send troops to Iraq, despite calls from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for protection for UN personnel there.

"As everyone knows, France did not approve of the conditions in which the conflict was unleashed," he said. "Neither today nor tomorrow will it commit itself militarily in Iraq."

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf also ruled out sending troops.

BBC diplomatic correspondent Jonathan Marcus says UN reform is

not only on the agenda of the General Assembly but in the very air, and there is a growing feeling that the UN needs to be recast.

Barnier backed the four countries' bid, and said Paris was in favour of increasing the numbers of both permanent and non-permanent members of the council.

The call was echoed by UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw - who also voiced support for a Russian proposal to stop suspected terrorists using political asylum in other countries.

India and Germany put forward their case for the reforms of the security council, saying it was essential for the legitimacy of the UN.

"The inclusion of countries like India would be a first step in the process of making the United Nations a truly representative body," Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said the reasons for the reforms "speak for themselves", as they would give the UN more authority.

Senegalese President

Abdoulaye Wade called for two permanent and two non-permanent African seats, while Nigerian President Olesegun Obasanjo argued that his country was well qualified for permanent membership.

But Italy voiced its opposition to the move, saying it favoured only the inclusion of more non-permanent seats on the council.

"We do not believe the council's difficulties can be resolved through new permanent, irrevocable appointments," Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said, adding that Arab nations might feel excluded.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is known to favour an expansion of the council, to enable it to command greater respect - especially in the developing world - and to make it more effective.

Washington, meanwhile, has backed Japan's bid for a permanent seat, but reserves judgement on Germany, India and Brazil.

The council's five veto-wielding permanent members are the UK, China, France, Russia and the US.

Andhra invites Maoists for peace talks

AFP, Hyderabad

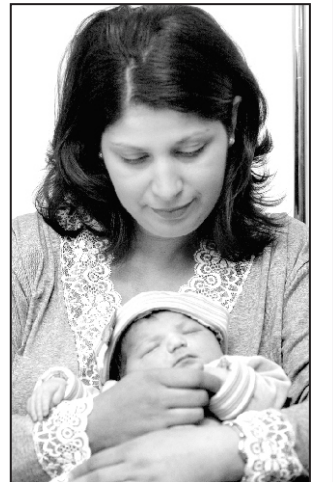
The government of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh has invited far-left guerrillas for peace talks to curb violence that has claimed thousands of lives, a state minister said yesterday.

The Congress party-led government after entering power in May lifted an eight-year-old ban on the People's War Group, which claims to be fighting on behalf of impoverished peasants. The rebels in turn declared a ceasefire.

Andhra Pradesh Home Minister K. Jana Reddy said a letter had been sent to the leftist group for unconditional talks on October 2, the birth anniversary of India's non-violent independence hero Mahatma Gandhi.

Reddy said the government wanted to negotiate directly with the rebels for the first time. Previous talks had been conducted through rebel intermediaries.

"The participants will be given whatever protection they need provided they do not come armed to the talks venue," Reddy said.



Baby for ovary transplant woman

AFP, Brussels

In a groundbreaking achievement, Belgian doctors announced yesterday that a woman had given birth to a healthy baby, seven years after storing her ovarian tissue before receiving treatment for cancer.

It is the first time that a woman has had a child after having ovarian tissue removed, frozen and then reimplanted.

The 32-year-old Belgian woman gave birth to a healthy 3.72-kilo (8.2-pound) girl late Thursday at the Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc in Brussels, the team said in an on-line article carried by the British journal The Lancet.

The mother, Ouarda Tourirat, has named the child Tamara, a spokeswoman for the clinic told AFP.

UN refugee chief backs autonomy for Darfur

AFP, Ndjamena

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers said yesterday that Sudan should grant more autonomy to Darfur as he began a visit to address the crisis over the exodus of more than 1.4 million refugees from the troubled region.

Lubbers, who arrived in the Chadian capital Ndjamena late Thursday at the head of a high-powered delegation, suggested in a BBC interview that a political solution could end the violence in Darfur.

"My gut feeling is the best would be that Sudan finds itself in a way where it accepts relative autonomy of its region," said Lubbers, who admitted that his statement had rare political overtones, coming from a UN official.

Troops guard Haiti relief operations

REUTERS, Port-au-Prince

UN peacekeepers beefed up security Thursday in the Haitian city of Gonaives where more than 1,000 people died in floods, after desperate survivors fought each other to get at emergency food supplies.

Toussaint Kongo-Doudou, spokesman for a Brazilian-led UN force patrolling the poor Caribbean country after the ouster earlier this year of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, said additional UN troops would also guard food convoys heading to Gonaives.

The decision to boost security around relief operations was made after UN troops had to fire into the air on Wednesday to prevent looting when the first beans, rice and other supplies were handed out to an estimated 20,000 flood victims.

"I think it's fair to say that the situation is tense because people are desperate. Many have not eaten since Saturday night or Sunday morning," said Anne Poulsen, spokeswoman for the UN World Food Programme.

"It's a concern but it's not a problem," Poulsen added.

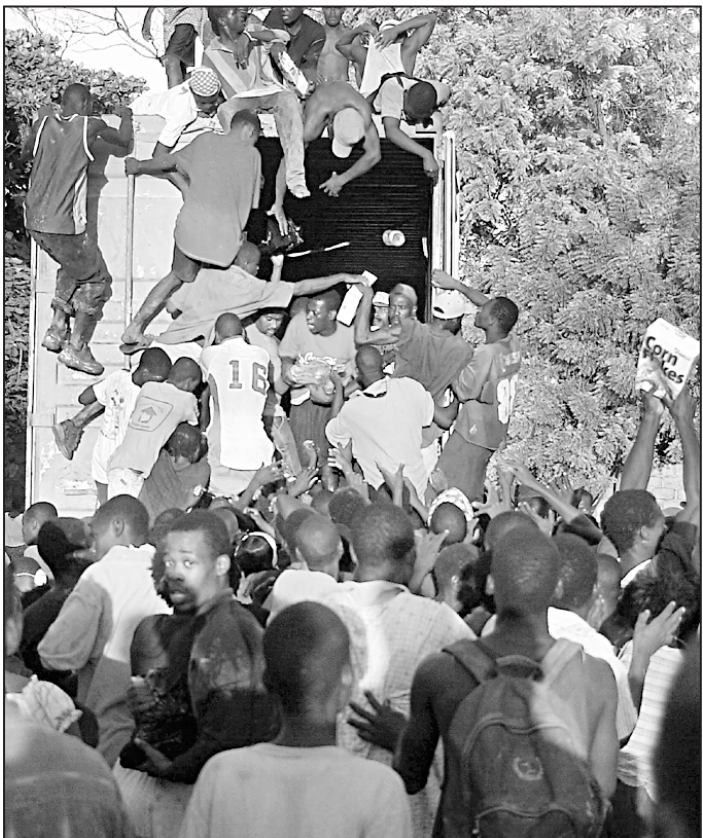


PHOTO: AFP

Haitians fight to get their hands on packets of food thrown from the back of a container filled with food aid in the north-eastern town of Gonaives in Haiti Thursday, some five days after floods inundated the city and its surroundings.

Intimidation keeps Gujarat riot witnesses silent: HRW

AFP, New Delhi

Witnesses to anti-Muslim riots that ravaged India's Gujarat state in 2002 remain too intimidated to testify despite the new government's pledges to deliver justice, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

The New York-based rights group called on India to set up a national witness protection program and to take action against Hindu hardliners allegedly threatening riot victims to keep them silent.

The Supreme Court last month reopened half the cases from the Gujarat riots after high-profile cases in which two Muslim women, one of whom said she was gang-raped, complained of threats that prevented them from testifying.

"But individual courage alone will not allow fair trials to proceed," Human Rights Watch said. "Most (witnesses) remain too afraid to tell their stories in public."

In an echo of the government's attitude during the riots, police have been refusing to record witnesses' complaints of threats, Human Rights Watch said in a 30-page report.

It said tax authorities had also singled out for investigation rights campaigners working on riot cases.

Some 2,000 people died in vigilante violence in the western state that broke out in February 2002 when an allegedly Muslim mob torched a train carrying Hindu activists, killing 59 people.

Human rights groups say Gujarat's Hindu nationalist government turned a blind eye and at times encouraged the bloodshed.

No Hindus have been imprisoned over the riots. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's left-leaning government, which defeated a coalition allied with Gujarat's leaders in a May election upset, has vowed to speed up prosecution.

While the Supreme Court has arranged guards for several promi-

nent witnesses, "physical protection alone is not enough," Human Rights Watch said.

"In situations of mass violence, like in Gujarat, effective witness protection programs have to include long-term sustained rehabilitation of survivors and witnesses to the violence," it said.

Gujarat police chief A. K. Bhargav said Friday that while he did not dismiss the report in its entirety, Human Rights Watch did not include the police's side of the story.

He said some witnesses to a panel on the riots known as the Nanavati-Shah Commission believed police had adequately protected them.

"The report would have been well-balanced if the version of the witnesses who have filed affidavits before the Nanavati-Shah Commission saying they were saved by the police would also have been included," Bhargav told AFP.

Bush, Allawi warn of worse unrest in Iraq

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush cautioned Thursday against showing weakness at a "decisive moment" in Iraq as he and visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi warned of worsening violence there ahead of elections scheduled for January.

The two leaders presented a unified front in the White House Rose Garden as they sought to soothe US worries just six weeks before the November 2 US presidential election while battling critics who have accused them of unrealistic optimism.

"Terrorist violence may well escalate as the January elections draw near," said Bush, whose credibility on Iraq has been attacked by Democratic White House hopeful John Kerry but also by some fellow Republicans.

Allawi was adamant that the crucial vote would be held on time

and that progress was being made in Iraq where US military fatalities and Iraqi casualties continue to mount daily.

The interim Iraqi leader told a rare joint session of the US Congress: "We are succeeding in Iraq. It's a tough struggle with setbacks, but we are succeeding."

"My friends, today we are better off. You are better off. And the world is better off without Saddam Hussein," Allawi said. "Your decision to go to war in Iraq was not an easy one but it was the right one."

Democratic presidential challenger Kerry said Allawi was painting an unrealistically rosy picture of the situation in his homeland.

"I think the prime minister is obviously contradicting his own statement of a few days ago where he said the terrorists are pouring into the country," Kerry said.

General John Abizaid, the head of US Central Command, told reporters Wednesday that more

troops would be needed to secure Iraq ahead of elections, but Bush said Abizaid had not requested more soldiers when the two met at the White House on Thursday.

"If our commanders on the ground feel it's in the interest of the Iraqi citizens to provide more troops, we'll talk about it," said Bush. "If he were to say that, I'd listen to him."

However, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged more US troops may have to be sent to Iraq to provide security for the January elections.

Washington is counting on Iraqi security forces to fill the gap, but both Abizaid and Rumsfeld admitted that the 140,000-member US force in Iraq may have to be beefed up at least temporarily.

"In the event General Abizaid decides he needs more forces to assist in the elections, like he has for example in Afghanistan, he'll ask and he'll get it," Rumsfeld said.

Musharraf 'confused' whether to give up uniform

AFP, REUTERS, United Nations

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf admitted Thursday to being slightly "confused" as to whether he should fulfill an earlier pledge to step down as army chief by the end of the year.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, Musharraf said conditions in Pakistan had changed since he made the promise last December as part of a deal with opposition lawmakers that would allow him to remain president through 2007.

"I haven't yet taken a decision, but it is certainly causing concern in my mind," Musharraf said, citing the need to provide continuity for a host of social, economic and foreign policies, including the fight against terrorism and peace talks with neighbouring India.

"These are issues in which I personally think a unity of authority may be required," he said. "Therefore, I would conclude by saying I'm rather confused on the matter."

Pakistani opposition parties campaigning to end military rule have argued that reneging on his promise to leave the post by year end would amount to a violation of the constitution.

If Musharraf does stay on as army chief of staff, it could also prove awkward for the US administration, which has embraced him as a key ally in the war on terror while calling for greater democracy in the Muslim world.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999, argued that under his leadership, the democratic glass in Pakistan was "99 percent full," citing improvements in human rights, freedom of the press and gender equality.

Putin vows to stay democratic course

AFP, United Nations

President Vladimir Putin vowed yesterday that Russia would not stray from the path of democracy and free markets but told critics of his anti-terrorism security crackdown he put equal stock in domestic stability.

"Russia made its choice 10 years ago for a democratic, free market, socially oriented state," Putin said in an address to a conference of international news agency executives here.

"There will be no turnaround," he said.

But in a head-on response to Western governments that have questioned his proposals for fighting terrorism by strengthening Kremlin political control over the country, Putin said security was as important as democracy.

"For Russia, democracy and stability are of equal importance. We are managing to build a system under which Russia will have democracy and stability,"

Powell asks Arafat to cede power

AFP, New York

US Secretary of State Colin Powell Thursday urged Yasser Arafat to cede control of Palestinian security forces for the good of his people, warning that international aid could be jeopardized soon if he did not.

Powell, who has not met or spoken with Arafat since US President George W. Bush declared the veteran Palestinian leader persona non grata in 2002, made the unusual personal appeal a day after sponsors of the so-called road map for Middle East peace delivered a gloomy message about the plan's progress.

"The question is not for me," Powell told reporters at the State Department's Foreign Press Center here. "The question is for the Palestinian people and for chairman Arafat."

"Mr. Chairman, how long can you wait?" he asked. "How long can you stay in this position where the Palestinian people are suffering, where it's difficult to go forward

toward the objectives of the road map, where it's difficult to achieve what you say is your dream, a state for the Palestinian people, when the whole international community is waiting to engage with you?"

Noting the somber assessment of the status of the road map from the international diplomatic quartet, of which Powell is a principal, the secretary of state hinted that growing impatience with Arafat's refusal to empower Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei could soon result in a reduction of aid to the Palestinian Authority.

"There is a weariness in the international community to continue to provide assistance that the Palestinian people desperately need unless we see some sort of political reform and determination on the part of the Palestinian Authority to improve itself," he said.

He did not elaborate on the possible aid cuts but said that to prevent them, Arafat had to allow Qurei to control the security apparatus.