

North Korea resumes talks with South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea resumed military talks with South Korea yesterday, three months after pulling out of dialogue aimed at reducing tension on the Korean peninsula, defence officials said.

Two delegations from each side met at two different locations near the border to discuss opening routes for transportation across the frontier that has divided the peninsula for more than five decades.

Both sides discussed measures to improve immigration controls on South Koreans on the cross-border railway and road links under construction, the defence ministry said in a statement released after the one-hour talks.

"The South's side also suggested to jumpstart suspended general-level military talks... but the North's side avoided giving an immediate response," it read.

The working-level talks were significant because they marked the first official inter-Korean contact for three months, a period during which relations between the two Koreas have deteriorated.



PHOTO: AFP

People register to vote in the presidential election Wednesday in New York City. As the October 8 deadline looms, thousands of New Yorkers have registered to vote on the street in the past weeks as a number of groups have set up portable registration tables and booths.

WMD report fuels debate on Iraq war justification

Lawmakers slam White House for false claim on banned arms

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Washington

An official US report saying Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction when US-led forces invaded has intensified the debate about justification for the war.

Democrat Senator Jay Rockefeller said thousands had died and yet Iraq had never posed a grave or growing danger.

However, the report by the Iraq Survey Group said there was evidence that Saddam Hussein intended to resume a weapons programme.

The White House said this showed the former Iraqi leader posed a threat.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair said that while he now accepted that Iraq held no stockpiles of WMD ready to be deployed at the time of the invasion, the report showed that UN sanctions had not been working.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard, another leading member of the coalition, said the report had changed nothing and he was "not in any way apologetic" for being involved in the war.

The coalition used allegations of Iraqi WMDs as a key reason for going to war.

Chief US weapons inspector Charles Duelfer, who heads the ISG, said in the report that Iraq had no stockpiles of biological, chemical or nuclear weapons before last year's US-led invasion.

Iraq's nuclear capability had decayed not grown since the 1991 war, he added.

President Bush himself again defended last year's invasion, though he made no reference to the report.

On the election campaign trail on Wednesday, Mr Bush said that the world was better off without Saddam

Hussein, and the risk of him passing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to terror groups was "a risk we could not afford to take".

But Senator Rockefeller, who attended a closed-door briefing by Duelfer before the publication of the report, completely disagreed.

"We invaded a country, thousands of people have died and Iraq never posed a grave or growing danger," he said.

World opinion also remains divided over the report.

Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister, Barham Saleh, said anyone who doubted that Saddam Hussein had WMDs only needed to visit Halabja - where the former Iraq dictator had gassed thousands of Kurds.

AFP adds: Democrats on Wednesday slammed the White House Wednesday for leading a months-long search to uncover an

Iraqi weapons programme that apparently did not exist when the United States invaded the country.

Lawmakers hammered chief US weapons inspector Charles Duelfer after his Iraq Survey Group (ISG) came up empty-handed in searching for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction program - the basis for Washington's decision to invade Iraq in March 2003.

Duelfer conceded at a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee that he probably would not find "militarily significant" stocks of weapons of mass destruction hidden in Iraq.

"What you're telling us is that in addition to having no WMD stocks before the war... Saddam chose not to have those weapons," said Senator Carl Levin, top Democrat on the committee.

US House left to wrestle with Sept 11 bill

AP, Washington

Senate passage of a bill to enact the Sept. 11 commission's terror-fighting recommendations now puts the focus on the House, where getting Republicans and Democrats to agree on the legislation may be more difficult.

House GOP leaders say their proposal, which includes creation of a national intelligence director as well as additional anti-terrorism and illegal immigration powers, is the best bill. "It's real simple. The House bill every single word of it will make the American people safer," said House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas.

Minority Democrats, however, contend the law enforcement and immigration provisions were included to force Democrats into a difficult, election-year vote that could have political consequences. "House Republicans have turned this into a political exercise," complained Rep. Henry Waxman, D-California.

Car bomb kills 16 Iraqis near Baghdad

2 GIs killed in separate bomb attacks

AP, AFP, Baghdad

A suicide car bomber plowed into an Iraqi military checkpoint northwest of Baghdad on Wednesday, killing 16 Iraqis and wounding about 30, as US and Iraqi forces sealed off roads south of the capital in a campaign to curb the insurgency before January's elections.

There were hopeful signs, meanwhile, that talks may produce a cease-fire agreement with a Shia militia headed by radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr although residents of his stronghold Sadr City reported explosions in the area late Wednesday. A negotiator also claimed progress in talks to end the military standoff in Fallujah the country's toughest insurgent stronghold and suspected base of Iraq's most feared terrorist group.

The car bomb attack occurred about 11:15 a.m. at an Iraqi National Guard encampment near Anah, 160

miles northwest of Baghdad on the main highway to Syria. According to the US military, the camp came under fire, and a few minutes later a vehicle sped to a nearby National Guard checkpoint and exploded.

Dr. Waleed Jawad Qamar of the Anah health clinic said his facility recorded 13 dead and 25 injured. Another hospital in nearby Hadithah reported three dead and five injured. US officials said no Americans were killed or wounded but had no report of Iraqi casualties.

Car bombs some piloted by suicide drivers and others detonated remotely have become an increasing threat to multinational and Iraqi forces because insurgents find them safer than other forms of attack that can draw devastating American return fire.

Meanwhile, one US soldier was killed and two wounded in an overnight attack on their convoy near to the Sunni rebel bastion of Fallujah,

west of Baghdad, the military said in a statement on Thursday.

An "unknown type of explosive device" hit the convoy at about 9:45 pm (1845 GMT) Wednesday, it said in a statement.

The three soldiers were taken to a military hospital where one died just over an hour later of his wounds. Of the surviving casualties, one was said to be in a serious condition and the other stable.

Another US soldier was killed overnight and an army interpreter wounded in an attack on a patrol in northern Iraq, the US military said yesterday.

"A 1st Infantry Division soldier was killed and a civilian interpreter was wounded when anti-Iraqi forces (US military terminology for insurgents) attacked their patrol with an improvised explosive device and small arms fire near Baiji," a statement said.

Kerry hopes to blunt Bush counter-attack in today's debate

AFP, Englewood

John Kerry aired a do or die test in the first presidential debate, but in today's second showdown he must beat off a fiery counter thrust by President George W. Bush.

Kerry aides expect Bush to come out swinging in Friday's town-hall meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, after the Democratic challenger invigorated his campaign with a statesman-like showing last week in Florida.

"The next two debates are going to be in some ways much tougher for us than the first one," said Kerry strategist Mike McCurry in Colorado, where Kerry was boning up for today's faceoff.

"The first was a make or break opportunity, we have probably more to lose going into the next two," he said.

With not much time before the final debate the following

Wednesday in Arizona, any bad impressions created on Friday will be hard to correct.

And Democrats believe media pundits who gleefully played up Kerry's showing last week in the hope of a close November 2 election, would prefer the opposite result on Friday.

"The storyline is so perfectly obvious - 'Bush comeback sets up the rubber game in the next debate,'" McCurry said.

Kerry not only dodged a knock-out punch by Bush in the first debate, but according to most polls closed the five-to-eight point polling gap with the President.

But he must guard against complacency Friday, and will likely try to again get under the president's skin, after sparring Bush's unflattering repertoire of scowls and grimaces in their first encounter.

ISRAELI WHISTLEBLOWER VANUNU SAYS

Israel greater nuclear threat than Iran

AFP, Stockholm

Israel is a greater nuclear threat than Iran, Mordechai Vanunu, who was freed in April after 18 years in an Israeli prison for revealing the country's nuclear programme, told Swedish Radio yesterday.

"We can say to Israel that if you're blaming Iran, let's go make Israel and Iran both open their facilities and be nuclear free zones. I think Iran (and) Iraq accept this but Israel is still not ready to accept this policy," Vanunu said in an interview on Swedish public radio.

Iran has been faced with stinging criticism for its atomic programme, which it claims is purely peaceful, but which the United States and Israel in particular fear conceals efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

Israel, which now views Iran as its number one enemy after the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, has been lobbying hard for greater pressure to be exerted on Tehran.

Vanunu meanwhile called in the interview on Israel to dismantle its nuclear programme - a programme the Jewish state has never acknowledged - pointing out that "Israel is the one who became aggressive and who took Arab lands".

He made his remarks despite a prohibition against speaking to foreign media set out at the time of his release.

At his release on April 21, Vanunu was subjected to a series of sweeping restrictions, including a ban on travelling abroad as well as holding unauthorized meetings with foreigners.

Vanunu was sentenced in 1986 to 18 years in prison for "treason" and "espionage" after leaking top-secret details about the Dimona nuclear plant, where he was employed, to the Sunday Times.

His name has circulated in recent years as a possible candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. This year's edition of the prestigious award is to be announced on Friday.

Giant 'corpse flower' raises a stink in Sydney

AFP, Sydney

Hundreds of people queued up in Australia's largest city yesterday to get a glimpse and a whiff of a blooming "corpse flower", the world's largest and arguably smelliest flower.

The Titan Arum's smell is described as something like rotting flesh or fish gone bad, hence its nickname. Its blooms, which can have a diameter of as much as four feet (1.33 metres), release a pungent stench to attract insects.

It has been drawing huge crowds to Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens since it reached full bloom overnight. It is only the second time the crimson, frilly-edged plant - a native of neighbouring Indonesia - has flowered in Australia.

"We've never had one flower in Sydney before so there is unprecedented interest from tourists as well as locals," said a spokeswoman for the Royal Botanic Gardens Trust.

"We've got people queuing for up to half an hour waiting to get in to see it."

The plant, whose scientific name is Amorphophallus titanum, blooms only two or three times during a 40-year lifespan. The current one is expected to survive another two or three days.



PHOTO: AFP

Ainsley (L) and Oscar Halbmeyer (R) admire the giant Titan Arum (Amorphophallus titanum) which has just flowered at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney yesterday.

Genghis Khan's palace unearthed

AFP, Tokyo

The ruins of Genghis Khan's palace have been excavated in eastern Mongolia, a Japanese archaeologist said yesterday, estimating the conqueror's grave is near the site.

A joint Japanese and Mongolian research team has unearthed some 600,000-square meters of the remains of the palace complex some 250km southeast of Ulan Bator.

Cornerstones and holes for pillars were found in what is thought to be a mausoleum near the centre of the remains believed built in the 13th century, when the savage warrior unified local tribes and founded the Mongol Empire.

Other unearthed articles include earrings and bronze accessories as well as incense burners with dragon designs often considered the symbol of an emperor.

The research team, which began their project in 2001, has also found the ashes and bones of horses and cows believed to have been used for a memo-

rials service for the Mongol leader.

"We concluded it was his mausoleum because historical documents are saying such a memorial service was held to mark his death," said Noriyuki Shiraishi, assistant professor at Niigata University and head of the Japanese side of the 30-member team.

"According to various documents related to Genghis Khan, his grave is supposed to be located within a radius of 12 kilometers from the mausoleum."

"We believe that with this finding, we have taken a step closer to locating his grave," he added.

The burial site of Genghis Khan remains unknown. The leader was believed to have been buried in an unmarked spot in the Mongolian Plateau.

While the team will continue their dig in the second phase of the project that will end in 2007, it will wait for permission from the Mongolian government to expand the project to find the grave.



PHOTO: AFP

This undated handout picture made available yesterday shows Genghis Khan's palace at Avraga site in Hentiy Province, some 250km southeast of Mongolian capital Ulan Bator.

Arab, Muslim Americans wary of new FBI outreach

REUTERS, Washington

The FBI has launched a new drive to seek information from Muslim and Arab Americans to help thwart any pre-election attack, a move some communities consider a racist campaign, which will not make America safer.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation said it was working hard to assure Arab and Muslim groups it was not discriminating against them in the renewed quest for information, which began with an FBI circular to field offices last week calling for stepped up outreach, including interviews.

"Unfortunately some of these actions coming from Washington paint us all with a big brush," said Marwan Kreidie, a leader of the Arab American community in Philadelphia which he said wanted to cooperate against terror but were concerned about civil rights.

"I think (Attorney General John) Ashcroft's actions have been racist. I think they've been very wrong and ineffective. More than that, I think they've been shredding the Constitution," he said.

Arab and Muslim Americans say they have received unwelcome attention since the Sept. 11, 2001,

attacks and the US-led war on extremist Muslim militants. Many accuse the government of singling them out for questioning, detention and civil rights abuse, and call the latest FBI initiative more of the same.

Some community members say they feel intimidated by the new drive. Others fear they are being strong-armed into snitching on neighbors or revealing political views unrelated to terrorism.

Cassandra Chandler, assistant director and national spokesperson for the FBI, said the fears were unfounded.

She said Muslim and Arab Americans only accounted for a small number of thousands of interviews held since the spring when officials first warned militants may try to attack the United States in the run-up to the Nov. 2 national elections.

"These are voluntary interviews. They are not round-ups. We are coming to ask for help," said Dawn Clenney, FBI special agent in Detroit, which also covers Dearborn, home to one of the largest Arab American communities.