

Russian Upper House ratifies Kyoto Protocol

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia's Upper House of Parliament ratified the Kyoto Protocol on Wednesday, leaving President Vladimir Putin's signature as the final step to kickstart global efforts to control climate change.

The approval follows last week's ratification by the State Duma, Lower House. The pact aims to limit emissions of greenhouse gases and depends on Russian approval to come into force. The Federation Council, dominated by pro-Kremlin politicians, voted 139 in favour of the pact, with one against and one abstention, a spokeswoman said. Presidential approval is the last step in the ratification process.

Under Kyoto's terms, developed countries responsible for 55 per cent of the industrialised world's emissions must ratify for it to come into force. The United States, by far the world's top polluting and richest country, pulled out in 2000, saying the pact would be too expensive for its economy and that it unfairly benefited the developing world.

Mine explosion death toll jumps to 129 in China

AP, Beijing

The death toll from China's worst coal mine accident in four years rose to 129 on Wednesday, the government said, as rescuers searched for 19 more missing miners.

The blast occurred on October 20 at the Daping Mine near the central city of Zhangzhou. Rescuers looking for the missing workers have had to dig through rubble and drain water from a 1,200-meter-long (3,900-foot-long) passage.

They "are still searching for the other 19 missing miners, whose survival chances are slim," the official Xinhua News Agency said. Authorities have not said what caused the explosion. China's coal mines are the most dangerous in the world.

14 Pak tribesmen killed near Afghan border

AFP, Islamabad

Fourteen tribal leaders trying to help Pakistani forces organise the surrender of al-Qaeda-linked militants in a remote region near the Afghan border have been killed, a military spokesman said Wednesday.

Another six people were injured in the incident, Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP, laying the blame for the deaths on a militant rocket attack.

"The casualties were caused by miscreants," Shaukat said, adding that militants had fired another 42 rockets into the area overnight.

However another tribal elder who said he was present during the tragedy, Azizullah Mahsud, claimed the military was responsible, and local press reports raised the prospect of a "friendly fire" mistake.

Barroso backs down over EU vote

BBC NEWS ONLINE

A vote to approve the new European Commission has been delayed after the incoming president withdrew his proposed line-up of commissioners.

Jose Manuel Barroso said more time was needed to choose a commission that the European Parliament would approve.

MEPs had threatened to veto the new commission over the inclusion of Rocco Buttiglione, who has expressed controversial views on gays and women.

Buttiglione had been chosen as justice and home affairs commissioner. The new commission had been due to start work on 1 November.

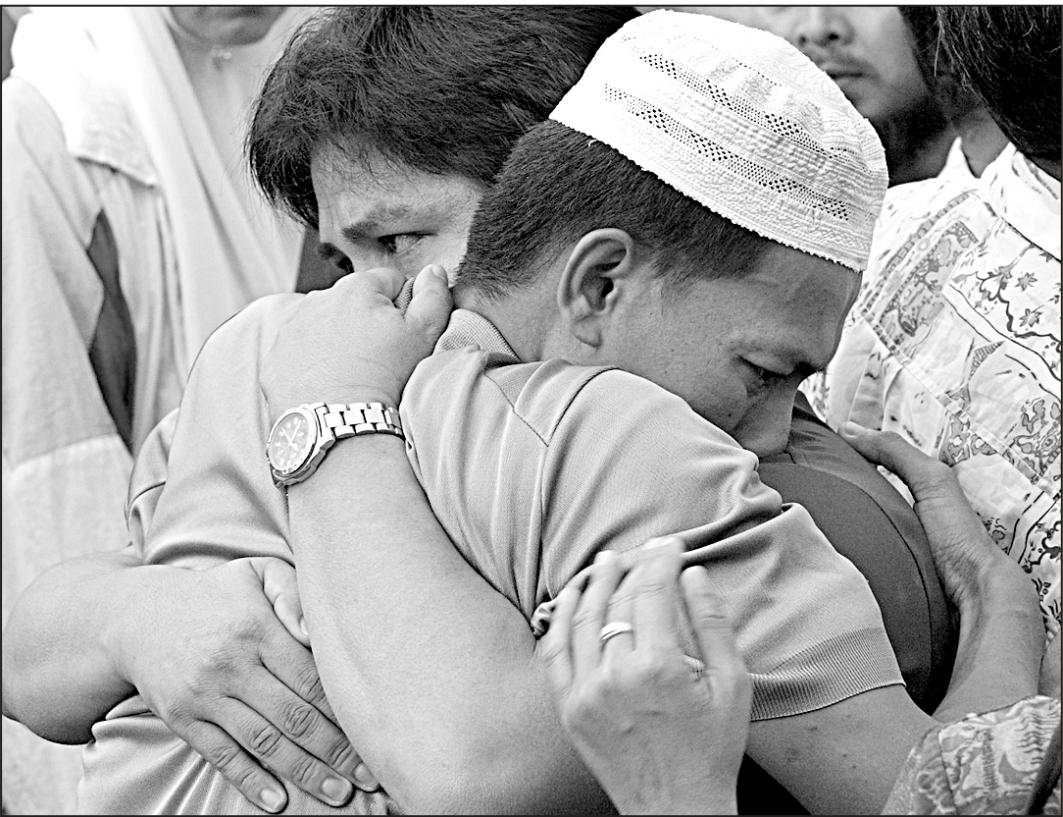


PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of Muslim demonstrators hug one another after checking the list of dead people, in front of a military camp in Pattani province southern of Thailand yesterday. At least 84 Thai Muslims died, mainly from suffocation in the back of packed security force trucks, after police and troops broke up a violent protest in the kingdom's troubled south, officials said.

Shocked relatives mourn deaths in Thailand

ARUN DEVNATH, from Bangkok

A shocked Thailand yesterday began another dark day amid warnings of bloodbath in the wake of mass deaths in the self-styled "Land of Smiles" that prompted countrymen to question Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's counterinsurgency measures.

Moderate Muslims here made a grim prediction that militants may press forward with a series of suicide attacks in a desperate move to avenge the deaths of 84 people in army custody in the southern province of Narathiwat after arrest on Monday.

Meanwhile, a separatist group vowed that insurgents would spread their war to Bangkok. "Their capital will be burned down in the same way the Pattani capital has been burned," the Pattani United Liberation Organisation said in a statement posted on its website.

Distraught relatives flocked yesterday to an army camp to claim bodies of the Muslim detainees who perished after soldiers herded hundreds of people into trucks after

a demonstration by more than 3,000 Muslims for the release of six village defence volunteers.

The latest bout of sectarian violence that prompted heavy-handed actions from the authorities unfolded scenes of melee. In chaotic moments after use of teargas and water cannons, soldiers fired at protesters, not in the air as the government claimed, witnesses said.

Troops rounded up the demonstrators after 15 minutes of gunfire, forcing men to strip to the waist and lie face down with their hands behind their backs.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRG), based in Hong Kong, blamed Thaksin for incensing security forces to control the demonstrations with brutal force.

"That so many people have been killed due to the use of live ammunition on crowds and the effects of tear gas and suffocation in trucks after arrest is most disturbing and utterly inexcusable," the AHRG said in a statement.

An inquiry team will investigate

the deaths, Thaksin said in an expression of regret to parliament, although he sounded defiant in the face of criticism of his attitude to human rights.

Under mounting pressure after blaming fasting during Ramadan and drug use among protesters for the high death toll, Thaksin apologised for the deaths, but insisted that his security forces were "soft" on the rioters.

Earlier, local newspapers blasted the premier for the callous handling of the tragedy without words of apology on Tuesday -- the day the massacre was disclosed.

He was accused of leaving the shocked relatives to rely on vague press briefings by a forensic expert and some senior military experts.

"The violence will never end if the government continues to handle standoffs with this kind of logic. There has always been a great loss of life in every military operation in the deep South," said Chaiwat Sathaanand, a peace scholar at Thammasat University's political sciences faculty.

British troops in Iraq start heading north

Japan won't withdraw troops now

AFP, Basra

A battle group of British troops began to roll out of southern Iraq Wednesday on a US-requested mission to deadlier areas near Baghdad in a major political gamble for British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"The convoy has begun to leave Shaiba military base at the airport in Iraq's second city of Basra, said a British army spokesman.

About four convoys of tanks, towed on lorries, Land Rovers and other army vehicles were already on the road, flanked by British foot soldiers guarding the route, an AFP reporter said.

Helicopters were seen buzzing above the convoys as they rolled northwards in the direction of Nasiriyah, packed with soldiers.

Washington has asked top ally Britain to shift some of its 8,500-strong Iraq force closer to Baghdad as US troops focus on wresting the restive hub of Fallujah from rebel control -- possibly through an all-out military offensive.

Britain announced last week that

it had agreed and would dispatch 850 soldiers for a limited time to restive Babil province.

The 850-strong force comprises 500-to-550 soldiers from a Black Watch battalion and specialists from other units, including experts in reconnaissance, engineering, logistics, and communications.

The redeployment came amid a storm of speculation about whether it was a purely military move or a political decision aimed at giving Prime Minister Tony Blair's war ally US President George W. Bush a timely boost for his re-election campaign.

Meanwhile AP from Tokyo said: Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said on Wednesday he won't withdraw Japan's troops from Iraq despite a new video purportedly showing a Japanese man taken hostage by Islamic militants there.

"The Self-Defence Forces will not withdraw," Koizumi told reporters as he visited sites in western Japan devastated by a typhoon. "I cannot allow terrorism and cannot bow to terrorism."



PHOTO: AFP

A rescue worker (C) holds two year-old boy Yuta Minagawa who survived nearly four days after a car was buried under rocks at Nagaoka city in Niigata prefecture, 300km north of Toyko yesterday. Yuta was rescued from the car along with his mother Takako Minagawa from the car as they dug with shovels through the rocks in Nagaoka, one of the cities worst hit by the quake.

Witness identifies 7 in attack on bakery in Gujarat riots

AFP, Mumbai

A key witness in India's controversial "Best Bakery" trial Wednesday identified seven of 21 Hindus accused of the arson deaths of 12 Muslims in 2002 religious riots that shook western Gujarat state.

Seventeen of the accused were paraded before a nervous 22-year-old Taufel Sheikh Siddique, who then made the identifications.

"These seven people were among the rioters who attacked the (Best) bakery and the bakery owner's house. They called us downstairs promising not to harm us, but tied our hands and legs when we descended," Siddique told the court.

"They covered us with wood, poured kerosene and set us on fire. Later, the police came and took us to a hospital," he added.

Siddique showed the court the scars of the burn and stab wounds inflicted on his body by the attackers.

The Supreme Court ordered earlier this year the retrial of the 21 men, who were acquitted during the first trial in Ahmedabad, the main city in western Gujarat state.

BJP to continue temple campaign despite poll debacle

AFP, New Delhi

Indian opposition leader Lal Krishna Advani said Wednesday a controversial campaign to build a temple on the ruins of a destroyed mosque would continue despite his party's rout in May elections.

"Our commitment to the Ram temple in Ayodhya is intact and unwavering. The nation eagerly looks forward to the day" when the temple will be built, Advani told party workers in New Delhi.

The BJP had in the early 1990s garnered massive support by campaigning to have a temple to the Hindu god Ram built on the site of the 16th century Babri mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Advani Wednesday acknowledged the campaign had slowed but was adamant it would continue.

"At the same time we must be candid enough to recognise the Hindu anger that exploded on the streets in the early nineties has given way to a patient wait for the new temple whose construction, I feel is inevitable," he said.

Sharon rejects Gaza referendum

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli leader Ariel Sharon rejected calls from within his mutinous cabinet Wednesday for a referendum on leaving Gaza after winning parliament's support to uproot settlements from land claimed by Palestinians.

Sharon's unprecedented plan for giving up Jewish enclaves on territory occupied since the 1967 war has drawn death threats and warnings of civil war while splitting the ruling Likud party and throwing the political landscape into turmoil.

In a rebellion after parliament passed the US-backed Gaza plan Tuesday, Sharon's chief Likud rival Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and three other ministers vowed to resign in two weeks if no referendum was set.

"I will never give in to pressures and threats and not accept any ultimatums," Sharon told Haaretz newspaper. "My position on the referendum is unchanged -- I am opposed because it will lead to terrible tensions and a rupture in the public."

Sharon fears that a referendum could delay the start of the withdrawal of troops and settlers from Gaza and four of the 120 settlements in the West Bank, slated to begin after another cabinet vote next March.

But the loss of Netanyahu and the others could make it hard for Sharon to avoid a leadership challenge or new elections.

Netanyahu, a former prime minister, is also hailed by markets as the architect of economic reforms. Fears that he could quit

knocked the shekel Wednesday and key share indexes fell more than one percent.

"We still cannot rule a referendum out totally. This is politics," said one Sharon confidant.

A poll published Wednesday said half of Israelis favored a referendum. If one were held, 59 percent would vote to quit Gaza and 28 percent would vote against it, the Maariv newspaper said.

Most Israelis see the cost in blood and money as too high for keeping 8,000 Jews in fortified settlements alongside 1.3 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

But nationalist hard-liners, who once saw Sharon as the settlers' godfather, now revile him for being ready to give up land they see as a biblical heritage to Palestinians waging a 4-year-old uprising.

India urges Pakistan to use official channels

AFP, New Delhi

India called on Pakistan to go through official channels with any fresh proposals on insurgency-hit Kashmir, after Islamabad publicly offered new ideas to break the decades-old dispute.

"We have heard those comments," Foreign Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told reporters referring to ideas mooted late Monday by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf who suggested independence, joint control with India or demilitarisation of Kashmir.

"We do not believe that Jammu

and Kashmir is a subject on which discussions can be held through the media," Sarna said bluntly.

"It is one of the subjects in the composite dialogue process," underway between the two neighbours since January, the spokesman said.

"So if there are any proposals, suggestions regarding that, that is the forum that we expect they will be brought to."

The dialogue process aimed at resolving eight separate points of dispute between India and Pakistan, including Kashmir, has already gone through several

rounds of talks, including at the foreign minister level last month.

Kashmir has been divided between Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India since they won independence from Britain in 1947. Both the nuclear rivals claim the Himalayan state and have fought two of their three wars over it.

On Monday, Musharraf called for a national debate on Kashmir saying that since a plebiscite in Kashmir as demanded by old UN resolutions and Pakistan was not acceptable to India, other options had to be explored.