

'N Korean nuke talks may resume in November'

AFP, Beijing

Six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program could resume by the end of November but it is uncertain what form they would take, a Chinese vice foreign minister told state press Thursday.

"They could be formal talks, informal talks or even talks in some other form," Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei was quoted as telling the Beijing News.

China is making full efforts to bring all parties, including the two Koreas, the United States, Japan and Russia, back to the bargaining table, he said.

His announcement comes after North Korean number two Kim Yong-Nam said in Beijing last week that Pyongyang was willing to continue the talks that are aimed at convincing the Stalinist regime to scrap its nuclear weapons ambitions.

It also follows a stop-over in Beijing by US Secretary of State Colin Powell this week, in which the talks were a main focus.

HR groups slam Nepal's new anti-terror move

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's human rights body yesterday criticised the government's renewal of an anti-terror law with a new clause allowing detention without trial for a year.

The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Control and Punishment) Ordinance was to expire earlier this month in the Himalayan country, which is racked by a deadly Maoist revolt.

But the government extended it, adding a clause empowering security forces to hold anyone in "one-year preventive detention" without trial on suspicion of terrorist involvement.

"The new provision ... is against constitutional and parliamentary norms and basic human rights principles," the National Human Rights Commission said.

US-based Human Rights Watch said earlier this week the revised law will only worsen the problem of "forced disappearances" in the country.

Militants execute 11 Iraqi guards

Clashes in Ramadi, Polish woman kidnapped

AFP, Baghdad

At least two Iraqis were killed in clashes Thursday between US troops and insurgents in the restive city of Ramadi, as a militant group claimed it had executed 11 members of the Iraqi National Guard.

A Polish-Iraqi woman became the latest Westerner to be taken hostage in the violence-racked country, while two US soldiers were killed in attacks in and to the north of Baghdad.

US marines said the fighting erupted in Ramadi after a patrol came under fire during a pre-dawn search of houses for weapons in the city, west of Baghdad.

Doctors at a local hospital said at least two people were killed and eight wounded, while the military said three marines were wounded.

"We have known for some time that the area was a hub for IED (improvised explosive device) making," said Captain Sean Kuehl, explaining why the marines conducted the raid which he said had

netted 15 suspects.

In nearby Fallujah, US planes conducted another air strike overnight against what the military said was a suspected safehouse for militants loyal to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the alleged frontman for the al-Qaeda terror network in Iraq. Hospitals reported three dead.

US and Iraqi forces have been at the gates of Fallujah since mid-October amid talk of an imminent assault to regain the city from the grip of insurgents ahead of nationwide elections in January.

In a renewed example of the willingness of insurgents to strike at Iraq's fledgling security forces, the al-Qaeda-linked Army of Ansar al-Sunna said it had executed 11 members of the Iraqi National Guard.

"The ruling of God has been implemented against them by slaughtering one and killing the others by firing squad," said the statement, whose authenticity could not be confirmed.

The claim came just days after

insurgents massacred almost 50 Iraqi army cadets by a roadside in the east of the country with a single bullet to the head.

The Iraqi interior ministry confirmed a Polish-Iraqi woman was kidnapped in Baghdad after Arab television station Al-Jazeera broadcast a videotape of the hostage.

"The woman has been living in Iraq for a long time and she holds Iraqi citizenship," a ministry spokesman told AFP. "She was taken I think from her home in Baghdad last night."

The middle-aged woman was shown on Al-Jazeera with one of two hooded men pointing a gun to her head and the group demanding that Poland pull out its troops from Iraq. No deadline was given.

Poland immediately rejected meeting demands of any kidnappers. "The Polish government is not in the business of meeting kidnappers' demands," Defence Minister Jerzy Szmajdzinski said.

Armed group claims to have Iraqi explosives

AP, Baghdad

An armed group claimed in a video yesterday to have obtained a large amount of explosives missing from a munitions depot facility in Iraq and threatened to use them against foreign troops.

A group calling itself Al-Islam's Army Brigades, Al-Karar Brigade, said it had coordinated with officers and soldiers of "the American intelligence" to obtain a "huge amount of the explosives that were in the al-Qaqaa facility."

The claim couldn't be independently verified. The speaker was surrounded by masked, armed men standing in front of a black banner with the group's name on it in the tape obtained by Associated Press Television News.

"We promise God and the Iraqi people that we will use it against the occupation forces and those who cooperate with them in the event of these forces threatening any Iraqi city," the man added.

Nearly 400 tons of conventional explosives have disappeared from the al-Qaqaa facility south of Baghdad, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Intelligence reform stalls in US Congress

AFP, Washington

Legislation to reform the US intelligence system after the September 11 attacks and failures in Iraq has fallen victim to partisan wrangling, endangering lawmakers' goal of sending a bill to the White House before the November 2 election.

Lawmakers met throughout Wednesday to smooth over differences between competing blueprints for intelligence reform, but appeared deadlocked after a week of negotiations to reconcile competing House and Senate drafts of the bill.

"We continue to work to resolve the many differences between the Senate and House versions of intelligence reform legislation," the top House and Senate negotiators said in a statement released late Wednesday.

"The issues are challenging, complex, and difficult," they said, adding that they expected to issue a more thorough progress report at a press conference Friday.

Tied US polls could be mother of all messes

REUTERS, Washington

A freak tie result in the presidential election could mean the House of Representatives would choose the next president, a scenario that would favour Republican incumbent George W. Bush.

But since the Senate would decide the vice presidency, Bush could end up with Democrat John Edwards.

If you thought the close 2000 presidential election was a mess, think about what could happen if the 2004 contest ended up as an Electoral College tie.

There's an outside chance of a tie because of the way the United States elects its president. Voters in 50 states and the District of Columbia select 538 representatives to the Electoral College. A winner needs 270 votes.

Nathan Ritchey, a Youngstown State University mathematician, calculates there's a 3.25 percent chance of a 269-269 tie in the electoral college. The odds have increased since late summer.

"Looking at the 10 closest states, there are 17 ways this can occur --

17 out of 1,024 possible outcomes," said Ritchey, who has been tracking statistics in this year's contest between Bush and Democratic Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts.

The odds of a tie fluctuates as states move on and off the "battle-ground" list according to the latest polls. After all, nobody a few months ago saw states like Hawaii, with four electoral votes, or Colorado, with nine, to be in play.

As recently as August, chances for a tie were only 1.4 percent, said Ritchey.

Even if Bush wins on Tuesday by a single electoral vote, there's still the possibility of a hitch.

A small town mayor in West Virginia, who is a Republican elector, may not cast his vote for Bush when the electors convene on Dec. 13.

"Gosh, I just don't know," South Charleston Mayor Richie Robb told Reuters. Robb said he admired the first President Bush but opposes the son's Iraq and tax policies. As a Vietnam veteran, he resents the attacks on Kerry's war record.



Kerry gains among swing voters: Poll

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry is starting to make inroads among swing voters as the White House race winds down to its final days, according to a poll released Wednesday.

The poll by the Pew Research Center said Kerry had made "more substantial gains" than President George W. Bush among a sample of 519 swing voters who were first interviewed in September.

A follow-up survey conducted last Thursday to Monday found that 52 percent had firmed up their preference since September while 48 percent were still uncertain how they would vote in Tuesday's election.

Forty percent of those interviewed said they were backing or leaning to Kerry, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts, up from 28 percent in the September poll. Bush's support grew by only four points to 38 percent.

US ELECTION 2004



Kerry, Bush scramble for votes in final push

AFP, Toledo, Ohio

With only five days left before the election, Democrat John Kerry tried to fire up voters in the hope a higher turnout will give him the keys to the White House, as President George W. Bush insisted his challenger lacks the mettle of a commander in chief.

Yesterday, the neck-and-neck candidates worked in key battleground states in the American heartland: Bush in Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin, Kerry in Ohio and Wisconsin before ending up in Florida, where he will presumably stump all day Friday.

The missing stash of explosives in Iraq continued to grip the frenetic US election campaign with the Democrat charging the Republican incumbent with "dodging and bobbing and weaving" on the explosives question, and demanding hard answers.

When Bush on Wednesday dismissed the allegations as "wild charges," Kerry fired back, "Mr.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians express their grief over the deteriorated state of their leader Yasser Arafat's health yesterday outside Arafat's office compound in the West Bank town of Ramallah. A decision has been taken to transfer Yasser Arafat to Ramallah hospital following sharp deterioration in the health of the 75-year-old veteran leader, who has been under virtual house arrest for almost three years.

Americans getting taller, much heavier

AP, Washington

Better nutrition has helped Americans grow a little taller. But it's been too much of a good thing: The nation is also a whole lot fatter.

Adults are roughly an inch taller than they were in the early 1960s, on average, and nearly 25 pounds heavier, the government reported Wednesday.

The nation's expanding waistline has been well documented, though Wednesday's report is the first to quantify it based on how many pounds the average person is carrying.

The reasons are no surprise: more fast food, more television and less walking around the neighborhood, to name a few. Earlier this year, researchers reported that obesity fueled by poor diet and lack of activity threatens to overtake tobacco use as the leading preventable cause of death.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescue workers carry out injured miners from the Listvyazhnaya mine in the town of Belovo yesterday. A blast at a Siberian mine killed 13 men in the latest disaster to strike Russia's accident-prone industry that has been chronically short of funds following the Soviet collapse.

Blast in Russian mine kills 13

AFP, Moscow

Thirteen miners died and 23 were injured yesterday after an explosion ripped through a pit in central Siberia trapping dozens of miners, Russia's emergencies ministry said.

Some 67 had been brought to the surface following the blast at the Listvyazhnaya mine in the Kemerevo region, a spokesman told AFP by telephone.

Some 103 miners were underground at the time of the explosion, the ministry said. Initial reports had put the number at 240.

It was not immediately clear what had caused the explosion. "We are not ruling out that the explosion of methane that had accumulated in the mine could have been the cause," Interfax quoted Sergei Cheremnov, the local government spokesman, as saying.

The Russian coal mining industry, largely unprofitable and suffering from underfunding, is notoriously accident-prone, with several fatal incidents over the past months.