

US attack would be strategic error: Iran

REUTERS, AFP, Tehran

Iran, responding to comments by senior US officials, said Sunday any US military attack on the country would be a strategic mistake and dismissed the US remarks as "psychological warfare."

President Bush last week said military action against Iran's nuclear programme had not been ruled out and Vice President Dick Cheney said Iran topped the list of world trouble spots and Israel could decide to bomb its nuclear facilities.

But Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said: "We think the chance (of a US military attack) is very low unless someone wants to make a major strategic mistake."

"Logically speaking, we don't think this is going to happen," he told a weekly news conference.

Iranian officials, including President Mohammad Khatami, said last week Iran would respond vigorously to any attack.

Analysts have said Tehran has ballistic missiles capable of striking Israel or US bases in the Gulf and can easily stir up violence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine through proxy agents and militant groups.

King of Bhutan starts state visit to India

AFP, New Delhi

Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck yesterday began a six-day state visit to India as the two neighbours seek to consolidate ties.

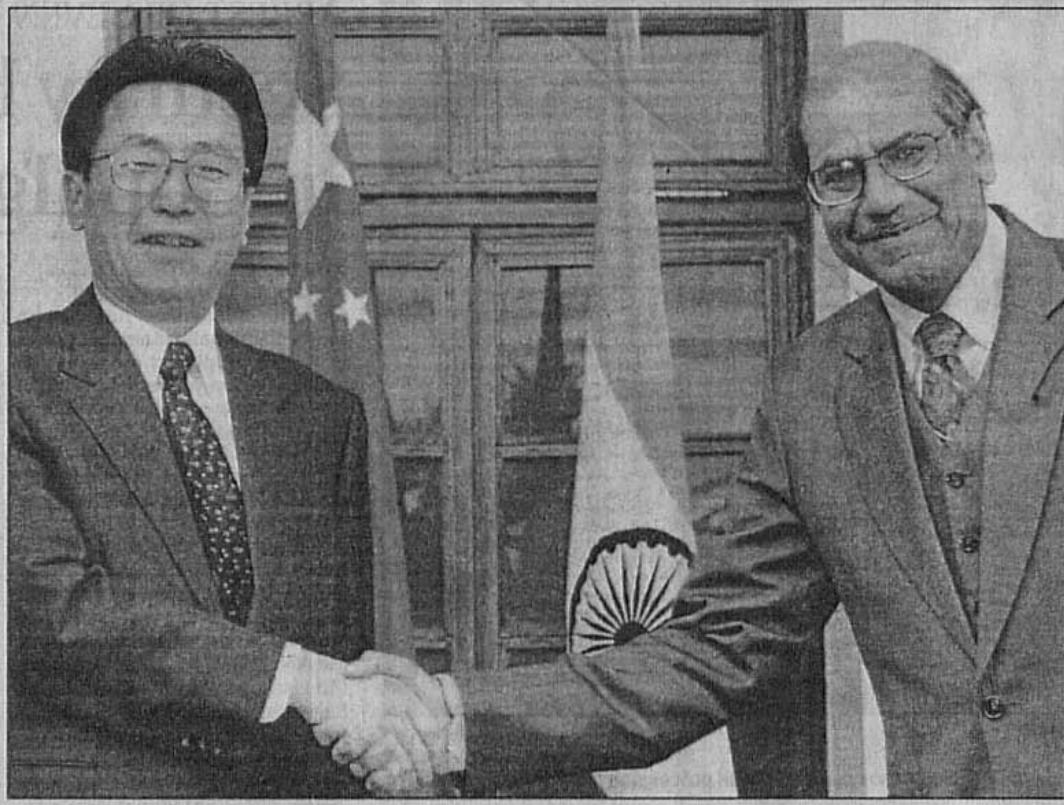
The king held talks with Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and was due later to see Home Affairs Minister Shivraj Patil and Vice-President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat.

The monarch, who will be chief guest at India's Republic Day parade on Wednesday, was to meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Abdul Kalam on Tuesday.

An agreement to build Bhutan's first railway was expected to be signed during the trip.

The Indian Express newspaper said the south of the landlocked Himalayan kingdom would be linked to three railway points in India's Assam state and two in West Bengal.

The network is aimed at boosting trade and economic development of the Mahayana Buddhist nation of 734,000 people nestled between India and China.



Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Wu Dawei (L) shakes hands with India's foreign secretary Shyam Saran before an Indo-Chinese delegation meeting in New Delhi yesterday. India and China opened a first round of "strategic dialogue", officials said, as their regional and international influence surges despite a nagging border dispute.

China, India launch first strategic dialogue

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and China yesterday began their first-ever bilateral "strategic dialogue" on a range of international and regional issues including terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, Iraq and the role of international institutions.

The dialogue between the respective delegations led by Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei also covered issues like North Korea, reform of the United Nations and energy security and bilateral economic cooperation, diplomatic sources here said.

The dialogue, which the officials said had no "fixed agenda", aims to broaden the scope of the Sino-Indian relationship allowing both sides to exchange notes on global and regional security issues.

This is the first time that the two countries held a strategic dialogue of the kind for which had been stressed by the Prime Ministers of India and China Manmohan Singh

and Wen Jiabao at their meeting on the sidelines of the Asean summit last year, given the huge untapped potential for trade ties between the two big neighbours.

Yesterday's talks would also do the spade work for a proposed visit to India by the Chinese prime minister sometime in March this year.

The strategic dialogue is in addition to the joint secretary-level bilateral talks on security and the joint working group on the boundary issue between India and China.

Although the joint working group has not met in the last two years, the issue was taken up at a higher level between special representatives of the two countries who were assigned to prepare a political perspective for resolving the problem.

However, there is a break in talks at the special representative level following the death of India's National Security Advisor J. N. Dixit, but officials of both sides say it would resume soon.

The Chinese vice minister is also expected to meet Manmohan Singh

and Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh.

AFP adds: Both sides are engaged in discussions to resolve the lingering boundary dispute -- a fallout of the 1962 war -- with special representatives holding several rounds of talks since June 2003.

Ties have warmed since a visit to Beijing by then premier Atal Behari Vajpayee in June 2003 who is credited with improving Sino-India relations by getting China to officially recognise the tiny state of Sikkim as part of India in return for New Delhi acknowledging Tibet as a part of China.

Later that year, Indian and Chinese forces took part in naval exercises off Shanghai for the first time, opening a new chapter in military ties.

According to a report in the Indian Express, the talks were expected to provide a forum to forge greater understanding on issues including terrorism, energy security, disarmament and United Nations reforms.

Yushchenko set for talks with Moscow

BBC ONLINE

President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine is due to visit neighbouring Russia - just a day after his inauguration.

The Moscow talks are seen as an attempt by the leaders of both countries to iron out differences.

Russian President Vladimir Putin initially backed Yushchenko's rival Viktor Yanukovich - whose victory was marred by fraud and later annulled.

Yushchenko on Sunday said Ukraine's future was in the EU. He will also tour Central and Western Europe this week.

Yushchenko beat Yanukovich in a re-run of November's disputed poll.

The 26 December repeat run-off was held after the Supreme Court ruled that the original vote - officially won by Yanukovich - had been rigged.

Independent election observers said the re-run had been much fairer than earlier rounds.

Zarqawi declares war on Iraqi polls

China takes custody of 8 freed hostages

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's most-wanted man has vowed to wreck next week's landmark polls and claimed to have murdered a candidate on the prime minister's list, while Chinese officials took custody of eight freed hostages.

Despite the grisly intimidation campaign led by Sunni Arab extremists to sabotage the country's first democratic elections in five decades, US ambassador to Iraq John Negroponte was confident turnout would be strong.

The group of al-Qaeda's frontman in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, claimed Sunday on the Internet to have killed a leading member of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's party.

"Your brothers in al-Qaeda's organisation in the Land of Two

Rivers (Iraq) managed to assassinate Salem Jaafar al-Kanani, secretary of the traitor Allawi," said the statement, whose authenticity could not be confirmed.

The political director of Allawi's Iraqi National Accord party told AFP that Kanani, who was on the INA's parliament list, had been kidnapped on Wednesday.

In a separate audio message posted on the Internet, Zarqawi said next Sunday's election was a "wicked trap aimed at putting the Rafidha (a derogatory term for Shia Muslims) in the seat of power in Iraq."

It was the second inflammatory message from al-Qaeda's supremo in Iraq since Thursday as he sought to maximize violence among the country's fractious mix of Shias and Sunnis ahead of the vote.

Rebels rallied to Zarqawi's call over the weekend as car-bombs tore apart a Shia mosque and wedding party in the Baghdad region on Saturday, killing nearly 30 people.

But Allawi told the BBC: "We believe the elections themselves will help in putting an end to violence by fighting terrorists."

Meanwhile, eight Chinese hostages freed in Iraq have been handed back to Chinese authorities, a diplomat said Sunday, ending 24 hours of jitters and uncertainty about their whereabouts.

The release of the men, all migrant workers kidnapped Tuesday on their way home from a construction project, had been confirmed a day earlier but Chinese officials had been immediately unable to contact them.

Video cameras for Indian state polls

AFP, New Delhi

Video cameras will be installed at high-risk polling stations in a bid to eliminate cheating in three volatile states next month, an Election Commission spokesman said yesterday.

The commission took the decision after a Supreme Court directive last week called for rampant electoral malpractices to be curbed.

"A decision has been taken to install a camera inside the polling booth. The poll observers will decide which booths will be covered under this order," the spokesman told AFP.

Haryana, Bihar and Jharkhand states go to the polls on February 3 with Bihar -- one of India's most lawless states -- slated for two additional days of voting on February 15 and 23.

Activists of rival political parties have traditionally "captured" voting stations and ballot boxes while polling officials have been accused of bias in all three states.

Though installing cameras at all the 31,888 polling stations would not be possible, "sensitive and hypersensitive" booths will be covered, the spokesman said.



Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse (L) talks with Austrian Foreign Affairs Minister Ursula Plassnik in Colombo yesterday. Plassnik arrived in the tsunami-ravaged island on a one-day visit.

Crackdown on Indian rebels in Myanmar

AFP, Gauahati

Ongoing heavy fighting in the thick jungles of Myanmar between government troops and Indian separatists has left at least five rebels and 10 soldiers dead, a rebel leader said Sunday.

Kughalo Mulatou, a leader of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which is fighting for a tribal homeland in India's northeastern state of Nagaland, said that the rebels were killed in intense shelling.

The bombardment began late Wednesday and was continuing, he said.

"Myanmar soldiers attacked some of our bases with rocket launchers and mortars, killing five of our fighters," Mulatou told AFP by telephone from somewhere along the India-Myanmar border.

"We also killed 10 of their soldiers in retaliatory strikes."

He said the attacks were taking place along the Chindwin River in the north of Myanmar, close to the abandoned World War II Shempyang airport.

He said the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, which was formed in 1980, has at least 50 camps with some 5,000 guerrilla fighters entrenched in fortified bunkers in the Sagaing Division of Myanmar.

"Our fighters are prepared to die. We are not going to leave our bases," Mulatou said.

An Indian intelligence official said authorities were monitoring the clashes.

"We don't know about the casualties but something is happening there," he told AFP, asking not to be named.

"Keeping that in mind, we have put the border on alert and security has been beefed up at vulnerable points to prevent militants from sneaking in."

Myanmar opens trial of military intelligence

AFP, Yangon

Trial for more than 300 people linked to Myanmar's disbanded military intelligence unit began yesterday under a cloud of secrecy inside the notorious Insein prison, a legal source said.

"The trials have started today," the source told AFP.

"No less than 16 special tribunals being presided over by 16 divisional and district-level judges were set up inside the jail premises," said the source, who went inside the prison.

Some 30 special courts are expected to eventually be operating within the prison walls, and the trials are expected to be concluded within 45 days.

Thousands of people have been summoned for closed-door preliminary hearings in recent months.

Journalists who had gathered at the main gate of the prison early Monday were denied access by security guards.

No details of the trials were available.

Pakistan accuses India of violating truce

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday accused India of violating a 14-month ceasefire in Kashmir, days after New Delhi twice accused its nuclear rival of launching mortar shells into its territory.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Masood Khan said small arms fire came on Friday from the Indian side of the Line of Control -- the de facto border splitting the disputed Himalayan region into Indian and Pakistani-run areas.

"On January 21, between 3:00 and 6:00pm, at that time there was a violation from the Indian side. We showed restraint throughout," Khan told a regular press conference in Islamabad.

The Pakistani allegation came after India said some 15 mortar rounds crashed into Indian-held Kashmir last Tuesday, followed by another 10 on Thursday night.

Pakistan has denied all the Indian claims.

Meanwhile, security in revolt-hit

Indian Kashmir was tightened Monday, with officials saying troops were ready to foil possible attempts by Islamic militants to disrupt India's Republic Day celebrations.

A three-tier security blanket has been thrown around Bakshi stadium, the main Republic Day venue in the state summer capital Srinagar, which has been the target of Muslim rebels in the past.

Troops have taken up positions in houses close to the stadium and in nearby government-owned buildings to guard against attacks.

Border Security Force personnel have joined local police to carve out fresh lookout points in Srinagar.

"This has been done to keep a vigil on anti-national elements," a paramilitary officer stationed near the stadium said.

Rebels fighting Indian rule in Kashmir since 1989 routinely carry out attacks on the holiday.

"We have made foolproof security arrangements for Wednesday's functions in the stadium," the officer said.

Lanka denies buying arms with tsunami aid

Norway urges unity

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government Sunday denied claims by Tamil Tiger rebels that it is using tsunami relief donations to buy arms, as peacebroker Norway urged the two sides to unite to rebuild the battered country.

A report on the Tamilnet website said Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), had raised the issue with Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen when they met in the northeastern town of Kilinochchi on Saturday.

"Our leader (Prabhakaran) has brought to the notice of the Norwegian delegation that the international aid coming to the country due to sympathy following tsunami disaster is being misused by the government," LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham was quoted by Tamilnet as saying.

"Our leader has pointed out that the (government) has taken steps to purchase arms from Iran at a cost of 150 million US dollars. This act is considered as an attempt to tilt the balance of military power."

Defence ministry spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayake strongly denied the claim that aid cash was involved but told AFP that talks with Iran had been going on for some time although there was no deal yet. "Nothing is finalised."

He declined to say what weaponry was being discussed or the sums involved.

"We have a regular armed force and procurement is a national requirement," Ratnayake said. "But as for using aid money -- we deny it."

Tiger rebels and troops have been observing a truce which peacebroker Norway arranged in February 2002 but peace talks have

remained deadlocked since April 2003.

Attempts by Norway to break the impasse have since failed and each side has accused the other of using the truce to rearm.

The Iran arms deal claim is the latest in a series of increasingly bitter disputes between the government and the rebels, said in Colombo late Saturday the donor community was concerned about the possible "politicisation" of the tsunami disaster.

Norway's international development minister Hilde Johnson, who held talks with the government and the rebels, said in Colombo late Saturday the donor community was concerned about the possible "politicisation" of the tsunami disaster.

In talks with both sides, she said, "we said it is important that this is a new situation for Sri Lanka and should be utilised to work together... in the reconstruction phase."

3 US states declare emergency

Snowstorm blamed for 14 deaths

BBC ONLINE, AP, Boston

The US states of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Jersey have declared emergencies because of continuing fierce blizzards in the north-east that killed 14 people.

The National Weather Service warned of "dangerously low" temperatures in some parts, saying people who left their homes were putting their lives at risk.

Snowstorms and heavy winds also badly disrupted travel throughout the region.

Boston Airport was closed on Sunday, forcing the cancellation of hundreds of domestic and international flights.

Some 3,000 flights across Midwest and the north-east have been cancelled over the last two days, leaving thousands of passengers stranded.

Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney declared a state of emergency in his state where up to 39 inches (96cm) of snow was expected.

In addition, meteorologists

warned that temperatures could plummet to zero Fahrenheit (-18 Celsius) in some places.

"This is likely to be a record-setting snowstorm in Boston when comparing against data dating back to 1892," National Weather Service forecasters said.

Monday classes were cancelled for many Massachusetts schools, as officials urged non-essential state workers to stay home.

More than 27,000 households were left without power in some parts of the state.

At least 14 deaths were linked to the weather: three in Connecticut, three in Ohio, three in Wisconsin, two in Pennsylvania, and one each in Maryland, Iowa and Massachusetts.

Two communities in Massachusetts Salem and Plymouth tied for the deepest snow with 38 inches each, according to the National Weather Service. Over 3 feet fell in some places north of Boston, parts of New Hampshire got 2 feet, and New York's Catskills collected at least 20 inches.



A couple walks across the Brooklyn Bridge towards Manhattan Sunday in New York city. Freezing temperatures compounded blizzard-like conditions in parts of the northeastern United States early as the first major snowstorm of the year clobbered the region.

Maldives to have multi-party democracy in a year: Gayoom

AFP, Male

The Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives will accelerate political reforms and will be a multi-party democracy within a year, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom told AFP in an interview here yesterday.

The newly-elected parliament was expected to finalise a constitution that will allow political parties for the first time in this archipelago of 300,000 Sunni Muslims, before the end of the year, he said.

"I think within one year's time we should be able to complete the constitutional reform process... I am hoping that the majlis (parliament) will be able to complete their work within one year," the 67-year-old Gayoom said.

He said he himself was a "reformist" despite criticism of his iron-clad hold on power and argued that he had been "reforming" the country since he became president in 1978.

"Reform is making things better... I consider myself a reformist because when I took office in

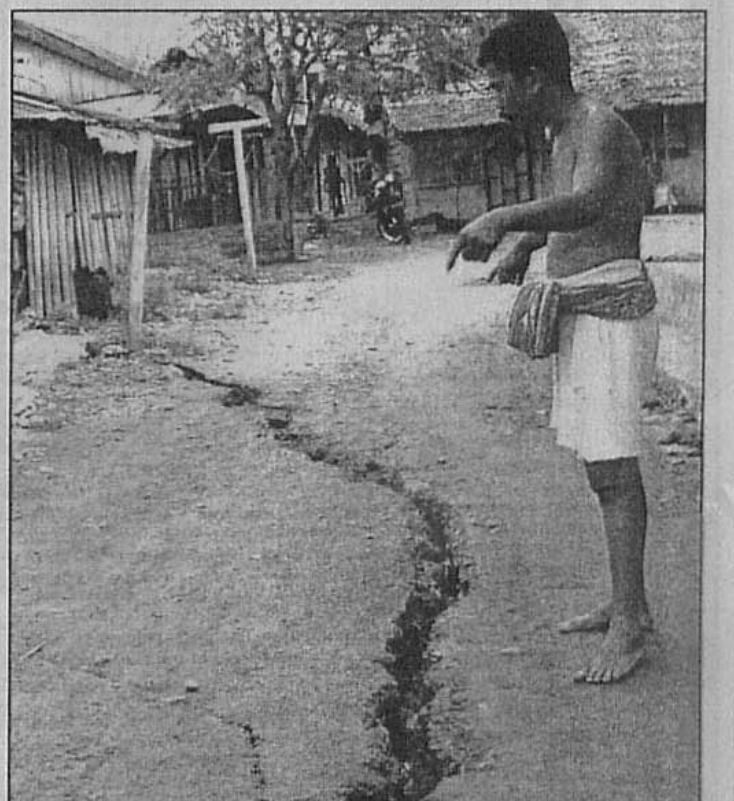
1978 it was so different. I began my reform program. It has been a continuing process for the past 26 years.

"Now I see that the time is right for more sweeping changes. That is why I have proposed a new package of reform in which I envisage a multi-party political system, as well as the office of the prime minister, a supreme court and also that the president should be elected directly by the people."

The present parliament does not have a premier and even the speaker is a nominee of the president.

Only 42 members of parliament are elected by the people while the president nominates eight members to the assembly which in turn votes for a president for a five year term. Gayoom is now on his sixth term.

Pro-democracy activists have been clamouring to change Gayoom despite him being credited with turning this once backward fishing community into South Asia's most prosperous nation per capita with a GDP of 2,400 dollars per person.



A man shows a crack after a strong earthquake, measuring 6 on Richter scale, that rocked Palu in Central Sulawesi yesterday. The strong quake sparked off tsunami panic in Sulawesi island.