

Clinton, Bush's tsunami tour begins in tears

REUTERS, Ban Namkhem

Former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush began a tour of Asia's tsunami killing fields yesterday in a devastated Thai fishing village which offered tears and hope.

"It's very moving," Bush said of a drawing of the giant wave hitting the village presented to the presidential pair by a young girl whose mother was among the estimated 1,500-2,000 people killed in Ban Namkhem. "I'll never forget this," he said.

Both were almost in tears when talking to reporters about the children who lost their parents in the Dec. 26 disaster. The girl, wearing a red cap and white blouse, drew in colored pencil a picture of a woman floating, eyes closed, in the water.

But her village, which more than a third of its people to a tsunami that may have killed 300,000 people around the Indian Ocean, was also in the throes of rebirth.

Thai soldiers were busy building houses of concrete or brick as bulldozers removed the last ruins of a village the tsunami almost wiped off the map but now a hive of activity.

"President Bush and I have done what we could to raise money and give help for all the tsunami-affected and we hope to learn some more about what else we can do," Clinton said in a village where battered fishing boats sat among the buildings going up.

The former American leaders were appointed by 80-year-old Bush's son, President Bush, to lead US fundraising for survivors of the tsunami. Once fierce political rivals, they said tsunami relief was above politics.

"You are almost in tears when you see this little girl here. It gets way beyond politics," said Bush.

Ban Namkhem was the first main stop on a lightning four-nation tour, including Indonesia's Aceh province, the worst hit area, to keep attention on the disaster and encourage Americans and US firms to keep giving.

Private donors worldwide are estimated to have given more than \$2 billion so far in relief aid for the world's worst natural disaster in living memory. And Clinton said it was important to keep media attention focused on the tragedy.



Former US president Bill Clinton (back) shakes hands with a Thai girl (R) while former US president George Bush Senior looks on during their visit to the worst tsunami-hit southern Thai fishing town of Ban Nam Khem yesterday. Bush Sr and Clinton arrived on the first stop of their tour of Asian nations hit by December's catastrophic tsunamis.

Divided UN backs partial cloning ban

AP, United Nations

A bitterly divided UN committee approved a resolution calling on nations to ban all forms of human cloning incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life.

Supporters of stem cell research said they will not be bound by the declaration, calling the language vague and expressing concern it could be interpreted to ban all forms of cloning, including stem cell research.

The 71-35 vote Friday reflected the divisions among the 191 UN member states. There were 43 abstentions, including many Islamic countries.

The resolution now goes to the UN General Assembly for a final vote. If approved, the resolution would only be a recommendation, not a legal requirement.

The United States called it a victory.

"We're obviously very pleased," said Richard Grenell, spokesman for the US mission to the United Nations. "This means that the United Nations is stating very clearly that member states should adopt legislation outlining all cloning practices."

Bush refuses to rule out military strike on Iran

AP, Washington

President Bush says speculation that the United States might attack Iran to end its nuclear programme is "just not the truth," although he refuses to rule out the possibility entirely.

"Listen, first of all, you never want a president to say 'never.' But military action is certainly not it's never the president's first choice," Bush said Friday. "Diplomacy is always the president's first at least my first choice."

Bush sat down for a series of broadcast and newspaper interviews with correspondents from Russia, France, Belgium, Slovakia and Germany in connection with his five-day trip to Europe next week to repair relations damaged by the US-led invasion of Iraq. "We have a tendency in Europe and in America to talk past each other," Bush said.

He said he wanted to "invigorate a relationship that is a vital relationship for our own security ...."

Asked what it would take to mend relations with French President Jacques Chirac, one of his toughest critics, Bush said: "Obviously nice words are nice, but deeds are more important than words. I personally don't feel bitter."

He said the United States and

France had big differences over Iraq, "but now is the time for us to set aside that difference and to move forward in areas where we can work together."

Bush said he would talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin about actions widely viewed as a retreat from democracy. "I mean, he's done some things that (have) concerned people," he said.

But he also emphasized that he has "a good relationship" with Putin and would talk with him "in a friendly way" about Western values based on the rule of law, openness, freedom of expression and checks and balances in government.

Bush also said he would join Putin in Moscow on May 9 when Russia marks the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

Speaking of US relations with Moscow, Bush said: "There is still some distrust between the countries but not at the leadership level. In other words, I think he feels there are some people in our government that are anti-Soviet, that have an anti-Soviet bias, and therefore hold it against Russia."

Bush said he would ask Putin's help in dealing with Iran because Moscow has influence in Tehran. In Moscow, Putin said Russia would

continue its nuclear cooperation with Iran and that he is convinced Tehran does not intend to develop nuclear weapons.

Bush also said he disagrees with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder over the future role of Nato.

At a security conference in Munich last weekend, Schroeder suggested a move away from Nato as a place to coordinate policy, saying the alliance "is no longer the primary venue where trans-Atlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies."

"I disagree," the president said. "I think Nato is vital. And I think it's a vital relationship and one that we'll work to keep strong."

There were repeated questions about whether the United States would attack Iran. One correspondent cited an opinion poll showing that 70 percent of Germans believe the United States is planning military action against Iran.

"I hear all these rumors about military attacks, and it's just not the truth," Bush said.

He said he supports European nations' efforts to persuade Iran to scrap its uranium enrichment program in exchange for technological, financial and political support.

SHARON SAYS Barrier not border for Palestinian state

AFP, REUTERS, Cairo

The separation barrier Israel is building along the West Bank will not mark the definitive border of an eventual Palestinian state, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said in an interview published in Cairo Saturday.

Asked by state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper if the barrier would be the definitive border, Sharon replied: "No. The real border will be established once total calm is restored, which will allow us to move toward the (Middle East peace) roadmap."

The internationally drafted roadmap foresees an independent Palestinian state living side by side in peace with Israel.

"It is not the wall that demarcates the border," Sharon added. The wall's "only objective is to prevent terrorist operations inside Israel. We consider that the construction of the wall has stopped numerous terrorist operations."

Asked whether the barrier would ever be pulled down, Sharon said: "We will study the matter."

Sharon was also asked about two other sticking points in the peace process -- the future of Palestinians who fled or were driven

from their homes when the state of Israel was created in 1948, and the status of Jerusalem.

"Concerning the refugees, I have an agreement with President George Bush which foresees their being able to return to a Palestinian state. That is our position. I do not see how they could be able to return to Israel."

On east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as the capital of their future state, Sharon said: "Jerusalem has been the capital of the Jewish people for the past 3,007 years after it was proclaimed as such by King David. It is the undivided capital of Israel."

Sharon says Egypt is doing more than before to stop weapons smuggling into the Gaza Strip.

Sharon, who plans to withdraw from the Gaza Strip this year, said in remarks published on Saturday that he hoped a halt to weapons smuggling would allow Israel also to withdraw from a strip of land in southern Gaza.

Egypt and Israel have agreed in principle to the deployment of 750 Egyptian border guards along the border with the Gaza Strip, which under a 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace deal can only be patrolled by lightly armed Egyptian police.

Opposition brands Nepal a police state

Over 100 political activists detained

AFP, PTI, Kathmandu

Nepal under emergency rule has the face of a police state and King Gyanendra's forces are hounding politicians and potential opponents, not Maoist militants, with their sweeping powers, opposition leaders said yesterday.

But the military denied the allegations and said the army was functioning under the civilian council of ministers, and had no more power than before the king seized control of the government on Feb. 1.

"Anybody can be branded a terrorist now ... in the name of security. Every normal activity is under the control of the security forces -- the army and the police," Ram Saran Mahat, a top leader of the Nepali Congress, the country's largest party, told The Associated Press.

Gyanendra said he took power because he needed the authority to combat Maoist guerrillas who have fought since 1996 to abolish the constitutional monarchy. He also blamed politicians for being corrupt and inefficient, pushing the country

into a "morass." Mahat said he accepted the king's assertion that Nepal's politicians had been squabbling for power and had governance problems, but said a state of emergency was not the answer.

"There were mistakes ... but you have to play the game by the rules. If politicians are bad, they can be thrown out by the people," he said.

Mahat, who has worked as a senior cabinet minister under three prime ministers, is the most senior opposition politician working openly in Nepal. Most of the others have been arrested or have gone underground after the king sacked the government, declared a state of emergency and assumed power.

Opponents of the king and some human rights groups have said human rights violations have increased, and the army is making most decisions for the country. The military denies this.

"They are wrong. We have a council of ministers. We are under its control. The military's mandate hasn't changed, it remains the same as before," said Brig. Gen. Dipak Gurung, the chief spokesman of the Royal Nepalese Army.

The council of ministers was named by the King after he declared the state of emergency, and is composed of some of his staunchest supporters.

Opposition leaders, students, human rights activists, journalists and trade unionists have been detained.

"It's a very difficult time. The police and army are everywhere. They are raiding the homes of the student leaders because they know that we are the ones who can build up resistance," said Keshav Singh, president of the Nepal Students Union, the country's largest. Singh is underground, trying to avoid arrest as he marshals students across the country.

Meanwhile, over a hundred activists of opposition parties in Nepal have been arrested after they staged anti-government demonstrations across the country demanding an end to the authoritarian regime of King Gyanendra.

Those arrested include activists of the Nepali Congress, Nepal Sadbhavna Party-UML and Janmorcha Nepal, party sources said.



Thousands of protesters from the Nepalese People's Rights Protection Committee and Nepalese students unions carry anti-king placards during a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday. The head of the International Federation of Journalists demanded yesterday that Nepali King Gyanendra free all arrested journalists, end press censorship and restore democracy.

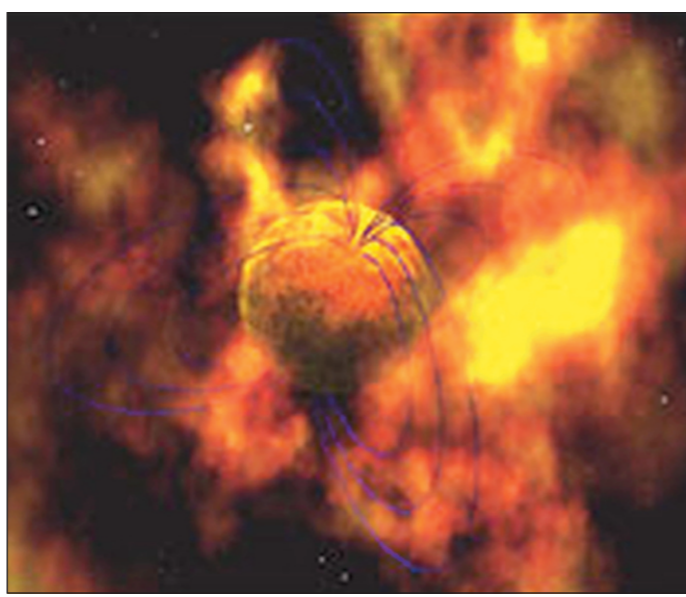
Strong quake causes panic in Indonesia

REUTERS, Jakarta

A strong earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale rocked eastern Indonesia's Sulawesi region on Saturday morning, sparking panic in seaside communities as residents fearing a tsunami fled their homes for higher ground.

The Indonesian Meteorological and Geophysical Agency in Jakarta said the quake was large enough to cause casualties, damage and a tsunami, although there were no immediate reports of any deaths or big waves.

"A tsunami is a possible situation," said agency official Rachmat Triono, adding that the epicenter was about 40 miles southwest of the island of Buton and 20 miles under the Flores sea.



Undated picture shows a star explosion on the far side of our galaxy that occurred on the surface of an exotic kind of super-magnetic neutron star called SGR 1806-20.

Huge 'star-quake' rocks Milky Way

BBC ONLINE

Astronomers say they have been stunned by the amount of energy released in a star explosion on the far side of our galaxy, 50,000 light-years away.

The flash of radiation on 27 December was so powerful that it bounced off the Moon and lit up the Earth's atmosphere.

The blast occurred on the surface of an exotic kind of star - a super-magnetic neutron star called SGR 1806-20.

If the explosion had been within just 10 light-years, Earth could have suffered a mass extinction, it is said.

"We figure that it's probably the biggest explosion observed by humans within our galaxy since

Johannes Kepler saw his supernova in 1604," Dr Rob Fender, of Southampton University, UK, told the BBC News website.

One calculation has the giant flare on SGR 1806-20 unleashing about 10,000 trillion trillion trillion watts.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime event. We have observed an object only 20km across, on the other side of our galaxy, releasing more energy in a 10th of a second than the Sun emits in 100,000 years," said Dr Fender.

The event overwhelmed detectors on space-borne telescopes, such as the recently launched Swift observatory.

This facility was put above the Earth to detect and analyse gamma-ray bursts - very intense but fleeting flashes of radiation.

Lebanese opposition calls for uprising

AP, Beirut

The Lebanese opposition stepped up its campaign against the pro-Syrian government Friday, calling for a peaceful uprising to force the resignation of Prime Minister Omar Karami and the withdrawal of Syrian troops.

Interior Minister Suleiman Franjeh, however, warned the government would not tolerate public disturbances. "The state will not stand idly by," he said.

In the first high-level political fallout after Monday's assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Tourism Minister Farid Khazen resigned, saying the government was incapable of running the country.

The departure of Khazen, who was close to pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, was a surprise but not expected to lead to a government

collapse. Karami quickly appointed Wadih Khazen as the new minister. The two men are not related.

The anti-Syrian opposition, which has blamed the government and its Syrian backers for Hariri's assassination, called on Lebanese to stage a peaceful "independence uprising."

In a statement, Lahoud vowed that the government would "uncover the circumstances of the ugly crime." The United States and France have called for an international inquiry. Karami's government has rejected that but commissioned foreign experts, including Swiss forensic scientists, to assist in the probe.

Later Friday, the United Nations announced that at the request of the Security Council it was sending a team led by Ireland's deputy police commissioner Peter Fitzgerald to Beirut in the next few days to investigate the assassination.

Iraq faces 'disaster' without reconciliation: Allawi

Shias observe Ashura

AFP, Washington

Iraq's interim prime minister Iyad Allawi has warned that his country faces disaster if it does not make firm moves toward national reconciliation and that it could fall under the influence of neighbouring Iran, the Washington Post reported Friday.

Allawi, who will stand down once a new prime minister is appointed following the landmark January 30 election, also told the Post in an interview that he would consider moving to another Arab country after leaving office if his security could not be guaranteed.

Iraq is in the grip of a Sunni insurgency that even since the election has seen daily attacks on security forces and mainly Shia targets.

Allawi said: "If the objective of national unity is missed if the objective of national reconciliation is overlooked, then this will definitely spell out disaster."

He added: "If the right decisions are not taken, yes, the country could really head toward severe problems."

The prime minister said Iraq was not now in grip of a civil war but said "it could be heading really toward severe turbulence."

Allawi's party came a distance third in the election for a 275 member national assembly that will draw up a new constitution and appoint a presidency council that will choose a government.

The election was won by the Shia pro-Islamist United Iraqi Alliance and Allawi expressed concern that this could bring religion formally into

politics.

He said this would also be a "disaster" and was also worried about the influence of Iran, which protected many Shia leaders during Saddam Hussein's rule.

Syria was also a problem, Allawi said. Meanwhile, Iraqi Shias marked their holiest religious festival of Ashura yesterday, a day after attacks targeting the majority community killed 34 people in and around Baghdad following its historic victory in last month's elections.

The day started with the deaths of six people in three separate attacks north of Baghdad, followed by a large explosion in the capital which targeted a police patrol but caused no casualties.