

N Korea ends missile-test moratorium

AFP, Seoul

North Korea Thursday ended a self-imposed moratorium on testing long-range missiles and said "hostile" US policy was forcing it to develop its nuclear arsenal, prompting immediate condemnation from Japan.

The moratorium was announced in September 1999 -- one year after it sparked global concern by test-launching a missile over Japan.

North Korea said it was agreed when dialogue was under way with the former US administration of Bill Clinton. It said current US President George W. Bush had cut off talks when he took office in 2001, making the moratorium invalid.

Naples police arrest 42 in anti-Mafia sweep

AFP, Rome

Naples police began a massive anti-Mafia sweep at dawn on Thursday, making 42 arrests amid a bloody clan war that has claimed dozens of lives, Italian security forces said.

The police are acting on 52 arrest warrants issued against suspected members of the local Camorra Mafia's Di Lauro clan, which is engaged in bloody gangland warfare with a breakaway group calling themselves "secessionists."



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian anti-terror police and prosecutor officials escort Abu Baker Bashir before his trial in Jakarta yesterday. Bashir, 66, was found guilty of involvement in Bali bombings and sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

Cleric jailed over Bali bombings

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, accused of leading an Al-Qaeda-linked group blamed for attacks across Asia, was jailed for two-and-a-half-years Thursday for involvement in the Bali bombings.

Bashir was cleared of more serious terrorism charges but found guilty of taking part in a "sinister conspiracy" that led to the 2002 bombings on the Indonesian resort island which left over 200 people dead, mostly tourists.

The judges said Bashir had not been directly involved in planning the Bali attack or the bombing of Jakarta's Marriott Hotel in 2003, but that he had given his approval for Bali.

"The panel of judges decided that the defendant, Abu Bakar Bashir, has been legally and convincingly proven of engaging in a sinister conspiracy," chief judge Sudarto said.

"It is true the defendant did not directly take part in the Bali blast but the defendant's words could be understood as his approval," the judge said.

The five-member panel of judges said the 66-year-old cleric's words to key Bali bomber Amrozi during a meeting in 2002 showed he was aware of the conspiracy and did nothing to stop it.

Prosecutors had demanded an eight-year sentence for Bashir, who was tried and cleared of terrorism charges at an earlier trial in 2003.

The verdict was greeted by yells of "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest) by his followers both inside and outside the court. The judges were immediately whisked out of the room by armed police.

Bashir -- looking frail dressed in his traditional white robe and shawl, a white skullcap and glasses -- has always insisted the key conversation with bomber Amrozi never took place and he vowed to appeal.

"I feel I have been treated arbitrarily with this verdict. It is unlawful for me to accept it and therefore I will appeal," Bashir said.

Indonesia has come under pressure from the United States and Australia to act against Bashir, and both countries Thursday described the sentence as "disappointing".

"It's satisfying that he has been convicted (but) it's disappointing that the sentence is just for two-and-a-half years," Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told reporters.

"We respect the independence of Indonesia's judiciary and welcome the conviction of this known terrorist leader," US embassy spokesman Max Kwak told AFP.

"However, given the gravity of the charges on which he was convicted, we are disappointed at the length of the sentence."

Analysts here blamed the light sentence on the prosecutors' failure to prepare a solid case backed by strong evidence.

Car bombs kill five Iraqi policemen

REUTERS, Baghdad

Two car bombs exploded near Iraq's Interior Ministry in Baghdad on Thursday, killing at least five policemen and wounding several in violence that threatened to overshadow efforts to form a new government.

A police source said the car bombs exploded just outside the heavily guarded ministry in central Baghdad, part of a relentless guerrilla campaign to stall the formation of the new government expected to be named in the next few weeks.

Iraqi politicians are engaged in protracted horse trading to fill top posts

in the government, creating a new political landscape that has raised concern over sectarian tensions.

A Shia alliance won a slim majority in the Jan. 30 polls, gaining power after decades of Sunni domination under Saddam Hussein. The alliance has chosen Islamist Ibrahim al-Jaafari as its candidate for prime minister. But interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi is bidding to keep his job.

The Kurds, who came second in the elections, are in a powerful negotiating position and are seen as kingmakers.

The new government will face the daunting task of tightening security against further attacks by mainly Sunni insurgents angered

over losing the privileges they enjoyed under Saddam.

Many Sunni Arabs boycotted the polls or were too afraid to vote, and the 20 percent Sunni Arab minority has little representation in Iraq's new parliament.

Iraqi officials had hoped the elections would help ease violence. But guerrillas have kept up suicide and car bombings in a campaign to topple the US-backed interim government.

Iraq extends emergency laws for 30 more days

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq said Thursday it has extended the state of emergency for another 30 days from February 28, giving the government the right to impose curfews and restrict movement around the country.

"Due to the persistent circumstances that led us to implement the state of emergency, we have decided to extend it all over Iraq except for the Kurdistan region for another 30 days," said the statement signed by outgoing Prime Minister Iyad Allawi dated Monday.