

Bush signs bill to save brain-damaged woman

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush early Monday put his signature to controversial legislation designed to prolong the life of a severely brain-damaged Florida woman whose feeding tube has been removed by court order.

"Today, I signed into law a bill that will allow federal courts to hear a claim by or on behalf of Terri Schiavo for violation of her rights relating to the withholding or withdrawal of food, fluids, or medical treatment necessary to sustain her life," Bush said in a statement.

"In cases like this one, where there are serious questions and substantial doubts, our society, our laws, and our courts should have a presumption in favor of life."

The bill was rushed to the White House for Bush's signature after the US Congress, brushing aside concerns of overstepping its constitutional bounds, gave final approval to the bill shortly after midnight.

With few Democrats willing to mete out what could be interpreted as a death sentence, the House of

Representatives voted 203-58 to hand over the fate of the 41-year-old Schiavo, who has been in a persistent vegetative state for the past 15 years, to a federal court.

The Senate unanimously passed the same measure late Sunday.

"We are very, very, very thankful to have crossed this bridge and we are very hopeful, very hopeful that the federal courts will follow the will of Congress and save my sister's life," Suzanne Vitadamo told reporters outside the hospice where her sister lives in Pinellas Park, Florida.

With the bill now signed into law, Schiavo's feeding apparatus is likely to be re-attached, possibly later Monday, following a federal court hearing.

David Gibbs, an attorney for her family, said the federal court in Tampa had already made arrangement to receive his petition during the night and forward it to an assigned judge.

Terri Schiavo has been incapacitated since a 1990 cardiac arrest that damaged her brain.

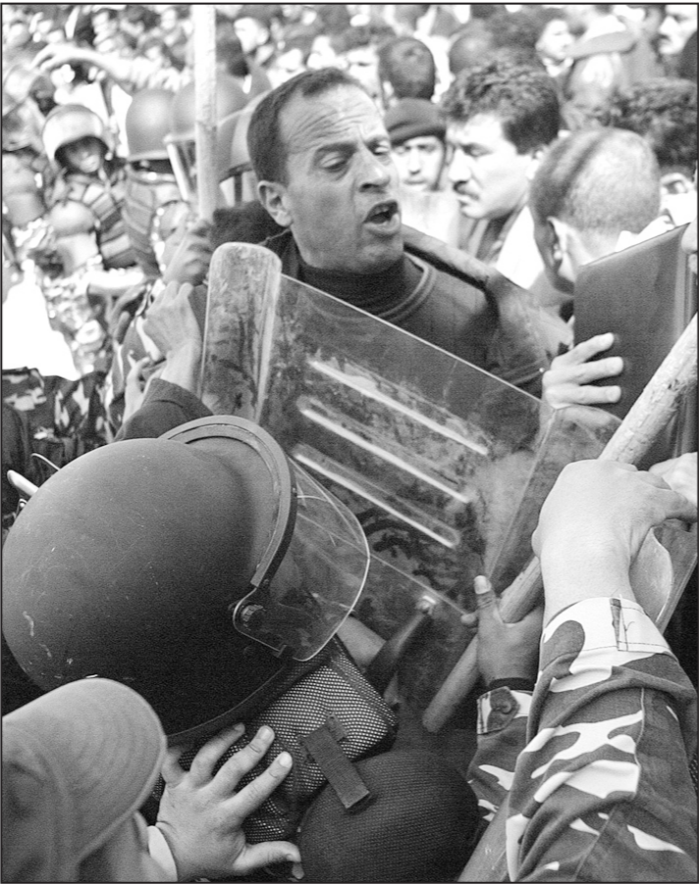


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian students demonstrate outside a meeting between Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei and his cabinet in Gaza City yesterday.

Israel's new Jerusalem plan angers Palestinians

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel plans to build 3,500 new homes for Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank to cement its hold on Jerusalem, government sources said Monday, drawing Palestinian warnings that peace efforts were at risk.

The blueprint for construction between the Maaleh Adumim settlement and Arab East Jerusalem clashed with a US-backed peace "road map," despite hopes for a breakthrough buoyed by a truce Israel and the Palestinian Authority declared last month.

The road map requires a halt to settlement expansion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war and sought by Palestinians for a future state.

But President Bush said in 2004 that Israel, which intends to quit occupied Gaza this summer, could expect to keep some West Bank settlement blocs under a final peace accord.

However, Bush also expressed

support for establishment of a Palestinian state that is viable and contiguous.

Israeli government sources said Sharon last week approved the construction plan, drawn up six years ago, for 3,500 new homes east of Jerusalem.

Israel regards all of Jerusalem as its undivided capital, a claim that is not recognized internationally. The Palestinians, who want East Jerusalem as the capital of a future state, accused Israel of poor faith in peacemaking.

"By expanding settlements in the West Bank, Israel gives the impression that it intends to exchange Gaza for a 'Greater Israel,'" said Palestinian Planning Minister Ghassan al-Khatib.

"Israel is responsible for any consequences resulting from this continuous violation of the road map," he said. "I don't think the Palestinian leadership and people can tolerate this."

Asked about the new project, a US official said: "We expect Israel to abide by its commitments under the road map."

In tandem with the home construction, Sharon also ordered a new highway to bypass the area and link the Palestinian-ruled cities to the north and south of Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem, Israeli government sources said.

"The prime minister is thinking ahead, to giving the Palestinians territorial contiguity," the source said.

As part of the Abbas-Sharon cease-fire, Israel agreed to give security control of five West Bank cities to the Palestinians.

The handovers were seen as a gesture to Abbas after he won a commitment from Palestinian militants to extend a de facto truce until the end of this year -- although it fell far short of the road map's demand that the factions to be disarmed.

The first city, Jericho, was handed over last week. But a snag in security arrangements held up the transfer of the second city, Tulkarm, which has been expected Monday, officials said.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice Monday urged China to reduce tensions in the Taiwan Strait, saying an anti-secession law was not welcome and unhelpful for any eventual reunification.

"The anti-secession law was not a welcome development because anything that is unilateral that increases tensions, which clearly, the anti-secession law did increase tensions, is not good," Rice told journalists after talks with Chinese leaders.

"I did talk to my Chinese counterparts about hopefully taking measures in the wake of this anti-secession law, taking measures that would demonstrate a willingness to reduce tensions in the cross-strait environment."

"We are not pleased when either side does anything unilaterally to either try to change the status quo or that increases tensions."

Rice, on a two-day visit, said she discussed the issue with President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing.

Her visit is her first as secretary of state and the highest-level US visit to China since the National People's Congress, China's parliament, unanimously passed the law last week.

UN peacekeepers killed in Haiti

AFP, Haiti

Gun battles in Haiti between UN troops and rebels have left four people dead, including two peacekeepers. A Sri Lankan soldier died during a raid on a rebel-held police station in the south - the first peacekeeper to die in Haiti since the force arrived in June.

A Nepalese soldier was later killed on patrol in the central town of Hinche.

The rebels - mostly former troops - helped to oust President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power, but have since turned against the interim government.

The former soldiers control large parts of the country and are a key cause of instability, the BBC's Claire Marshall says.

They have not been paid since the army was disbanded by Mr Aristide in 1995.

The decommissioned troops are demanding compensation from the interim government as a reward for their part in the rebellion which toppled the former president last year.

BBC poll shows support for UN reform

BBC NEWS ONLINE

There is overwhelming popular support for the UN to be reformed, according to a BBC World Service poll among the citizens of 23 countries.

They favoured a more powerful UN and backed the idea of adding Germany, India, Japan and Brazil to the organisation's Security Council.

Most wanted the Security Council to be able to override the veto power of the permanent members.

Just over 23,500 people were questioned for the survey, completed in January.

The proposal to expand the UN Security Council to include new permanent members was supported by a majority in 22 of the 23 countries.

These included majority backing

in four of the current permanent members, the US (70%), Britain (74%), France (67%) and China (54%).

In Russia, the fifth permanent member, only 44% backed the idea of expansion.

An average of 69% of those questioned in the poll favoured enlargement of the Security Council, with the strongest support coming from Italy (86%), Canada (84%), Germany and Australia (both 81%).

Among the countries discussed as possible new members, Germany and Japan were especially popular.

Germany gets the nod in 21 nations, with an average of 56% across all countries.

In the two remaining countries, China and South Korea, opposition is attributed to a reluctance to expand-

ing membership in principal.

An average of 54% supported Japan's membership, although support was low in Russia and South Korea and opposed by those questioned in China.

In all countries but one, more people favour than oppose the idea of giving the UN Security Council the power to override the veto of a permanent member.

There was an overall average support of 58%, with 24% against.

Respondents said they wanted to see a UN becoming "significantly more powerful in world affairs", and registered an average support of 64%.

The poll of 23,518 people was conducted by the international polling firm GlobeScan, together with the Program on International Policy Attitudes (Pipa) at the University of Maryland.

US reconsidering visa denial to Modi: Pallone

PTI, New York

The US is reconsidering the denial of visa to Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a leading Congressman and founder of India Caucus group Frank Pallone said on Monday.

He said he would work to get Modi's visa restored. "If there is difference of opinion, there should be a dialogue and not attempt to shut out a view point," Pallone said at a meeting convened by the Association of Indian Americans of North America.

Modi addressed the meeting via satellite from Gandhinagar after he was denied the US visa.

"The US government is reconsidering the case," he said adding, however, that he is not sure about the outcome.

Pallone also stressed on the need for India to ensure that it maintains its secular character, saying that religious fundamentalism, whether Christian, Muslim or Hindu, has no place in the modern world.

Ball in N Korea's court: Rice Reiterates US has no intention to attack

AFP, Beijing

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Monday the ball was in North Korea's court as to when stalled talks on Pyongyang's nuclear program can restart, and reiterated Washington has no plans to attack.

"Whether the talks can restart depends on North Korea. Everyone is waiting and is ready to have a constructive discussion," Rice said during a visit to China focussed on the North's nuclear ambitions.

"We have no intention to attack." In addition, Rice said Washington was "prepared to think of their energy needs." The North had insisted it needed a nuclear program to provide energy.

"We hope North Korea understands that this (six-party talks) is the only way to address their needs," Rice told a news conference on the last day of her two-day visit to Pyongyang's closest supporter Beijing.

Earlier on her Asian tour, Rice in South Korea Sunday ruled out

separate talks between the United States and North Korea but said direct dialogue would take place as part of six-party nuclear negotiations.

She also called on Pyongyang to make a "strategic decision" to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

Rice, on the second day of a visit to South Korea, said that only through six-party talks would North Korea get the "respect that they have desired and ... the assistance that they need".



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) receives the best Parliamentarian Award from Indian President Abdul Kalam (L) as Parliament Speaker Somnath Chatterjee (C) looks on, during a function at the parliament house in New Delhi yesterday.

Singh, Advani adjudged 'Best Parliamentarian'

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Union Minister Arjun Singh, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha LK Advani and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Jaswant Singh were on Monday conferred with the 'Best Parliamentarian' awards for outstanding performances as representatives of the people.

Presenting the awards, President APJ Abdul Kalam regretted that doubts have been created in public eye over the democratic system recently because of "arithmetical compulsions of incremental numbers and the alleged tradability of certain legislative seats, won perhaps through means allegedly dubious and undemocratic".

'Pakistan may hand over AQ Khan to US'

IANs, Islamabad

A powerful opposition grouping here claims that the Pakistan government may hand over father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb and disgraced scientist AQ Khan to the US.

The claim was made by Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed at a "million man march" organised by the group in Karachi Sunday, according to a report in Daily Times.

The MMA, an alliance of six Islamist parties, also called President Pervez Musharraf a security threat to Pakistan.

Ahmed said Musharraf had compromised Pakistan's nuclear programme, which acted as a

deterrent against foreign aggression, and had made the country's defence insecure. He also accused the president of "misguiding the nation under the pretext of enlightened moderation".

He criticised Musharraf for supporting the US-led attack on and "occupation" of Afghanistan and accused him of failure to promote Islamic values and include the religion column in passports and allowing the Aga Khan Board, an NGO, to take over the country's education system.

He also criticised the government's flawed economic policies, saying they had forced the underprivileged segment of society to the brink of economic disaster.



Thousands seek refuge after quake in Japan

REUTERS, Genkaijima

Nearly 3,000 people took refuge at evacuation centers on Japan's southern main island of Kyushu Monday, a day after a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck, killing one and injuring about 500 people.

On Genkaijima, a small island off the northern coast of Kyushu and hardest hit by the quake, about 200 buildings were either destroyed or damaged, and roads were cracked and blocked in many areas by debris.

Most of the 700 residents of the hilly island fled to the main island and spent a sleepless night in gymnasiums used as evacuation centers.

"I could not sleep because I was

so worried," said one Genkaijima resident, a man in his 40s.

"I wanted to stay on the island, but the aftershocks were getting so bad, I felt it was just too dangerous," he said, sitting up on his futon mattress.

The focus of Sunday's quake was shallow and off the western coast of Fukuoka Prefecture, about 900 km (550 miles) southwest of Tokyo.

Soldiers in camouflage fatigues carried out relief operations on Genkaijima while police and government officials wearing helmets toured the island to assess the damage.



Philippine Ambassador Jose Lino B. Guerrero and Bangladesh Foreign Minister Morshed Khan put the medal and lapel pin of the Ancient Order of Sikatuna, conferred by Philippine government on former OIC Assistant Secretary-General Mohammed Mohsin in Dhaka last week.