

No change to US, Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan

AFP, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan does not plan to call into question the presence or status of US and Russian military bases despite the change in power there, the new Kyrgyz acting head of state and government said yesterday.

"Kyrgyzstan is not planning to review its previous international engagements," Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the opposition leader designated by parliament as the Central Asian state's interim president, told reporters.

"This applies to the air bases of the anti-terrorism coalition and the Russian air base at Kant," Bakiyev said.

The Russian base at Kant, inaugurated personally by President Vladimir Putin in October 2003, was the first military facility set up by Moscow in any former Soviet republic since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

It was located at the site of a one-time Soviet air base that had been empty since the early 1990s and was regarded as a counter-presence to a new air base set up in 2002 by the US-led anti-terrorism coalition after the September 11 attacks.

The fate of both bases was called into question by the sudden collapse of the regime led by Askar Akayev, whose whereabouts were still unconfirmed Friday.

Putin loses another ally in uprising

Ex-Soviet dominions go down

AFP, Brussels

Russian President Vladimir Putin has lost another ally in the uprising in Kyrgyzstan, the latest ex-Soviet government brought down by people power after Georgia and Ukraine, press commentators said yesterday.

"Putin is losing his mates," said the French daily Liberation after the mostly peaceful ouster of President Askar Akayev by the masses in Bishkek in fast-moving events Thursday.

"A domino effect in Moscow's backyard," was how Austria's Die Presse described the uprising which followed the change of government in Georgia in late 2003 and Ukraine's Orange Revolution at the end of last year.

The Russian president on Friday blasted as "illegitimate" the change of power in Kyrgyzstan, where parliament appointed opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev acting head of state.

Bakiyev immediately announced plans for fresh elections in June

following the Kyrgyz uprising, which like in its fellow ex-Soviet states was triggered by contested elections.

In Spain, the El Pais daily agreed that the events in Bishkek, like those in Tbilisi and Kiev before them were "a serious warning to Putin."

"The democratic tide which swept first through Georgia and more recently in Ukraine seems able to reach to the furthest corners of the former Soviet Union," said the centre-left newspaper.

The domino metaphor was used by many newspapers, including in Britain where the Independent commented that "Russia and the US have already reached an apparently amicable agreement to share influence."

But the Times voiced another concern — the threat that Islamicist movements could exploit the political uncertainty.

"Heartening though it is to see dictators overthrown and repression challenged, no-one should underestimate the risk that 'Islamist extremists ... will exploit the power vacuum,' it said.

The Daily Telegraph struck a more positive note, welcoming the fact that "the strengthening of Kyrgyz democracy will powerfully affect a region characterised by authoritarian leaders."

The question of which ex-Soviet states will be next was raised by Italy's daily La Repubblica.

It cited Harvard expert Marshall Goldman as asking: "What could prevent opposition groups in neighbouring Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan doing the same, given that as regards democracy their situation is even worse?"

"The truth is that democracy is a contagious disease," he said.

Liberation echoed the view in similar terms.

"The ease with which (the Kyrgyz president) was toppled is a clear warning to all neighbouring dictators who try to save themselves from this contagious democracy."

Czech daily Lidove Noviny commented that the domino-like collapse of governments of the last 18 months could easily have been predicted.



AFP, London

Islamic extremists may be a force in parts of Central Asia, but they are unlikely to profit much from any void in Kyrgyzstan following the collapse of the government in Bishkek, experts say.

They said Islamic militants from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries were unlikely to try to set up base in Kyrgyzstan or win over most Muslims there.

"Why would they give up Waziristan, the northern border between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and go to Kyrgyzstan?" asked Alex Vatanka, the Eurasia Editor at Jane's Sentinel Security Assessments.

"Somebody like Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, they've been such a success hiding there for so long," Vatanka told AFP.

"Unless that area becomes totally unavailable to them, why would they go to totally new territory where you don't have the kind of connections with the clans and the warlords they've had in the past?" he asked.

Kyrgyzstan's regime under president Askar Akayev fell apart Thursday after opposition protest-

ers took over the seat of government and the presidency in a dramatic escalation of rallies against a disputed parliamentary election.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is weakened. Its military leader Juma Namangani probably died in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan in 2001, during the US-led war that toppled the Taliban and drove out bin Laden's al-Qaeda, while IMU political leaders were believed to be hiding in Waziristan, he said.

Nor is Kyrgyzstan particularly fertile ground for Islamic extremism, according to both Vatanka and Oksana Antonenko, a specialist at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

Antonenko doubted that Hizb-U-Tahrir, which is the only organised Islamic group with declared political ambitions, would emerge as a "unified force" across the country following the collapse of the government in Bishkek.

Hizb-U-Tahrir has also described itself as non-violent.

With a possibly chaotic transition period, "it is possible that on some regional level, particularly in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, some of those organisations will be able to recruit perhaps even more members," she said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian students at the Vishwabharati University perform a morning dance, during "Basant Utsav" celebrations at Shantiniketan, some 150km northwest of Kolkata yesterday. "Basant Utsav", the spring festival, takes place there on the eve of the nationwide celebrations of "Holi", the festival of colours, as it is known elsewhere in the country.

100 Nepali soldiers guilty of abusing Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's army has taken action against 109 soldiers found guilty of violating human rights while battling Maoist rebels, and some of the abusers were sent to jail, the military said Thursday.

"The army in its investigation has found a total of 109 soldiers guilty of violating human rights while fighting against the Maoist rebels," army spokesman Brigadier General Dipak Gurung told a press conference.

"Of them at least 44 were jailed for various terms while 31 others have been dismissed from the army service," Gurung said.

"At least 12 soldiers were demoted, grade increment for four was suspended, nine's promotion halted and eight others were sternly warned," he said.

"One of the soldiers found involved in a rape case was handed

over to the civil authority for appropriate punishment."

He did not give details of the abuses the soldiers were found to have committed.

National and international human rights organisations have accused both the Maoists and the security forces of widespread abuses.

Soldiers have in particular been accused of killing, abducting and torturing civilians as they track down Maoist rebels, who have been battling the government since 1996.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a report in March that Nepali security forces "have established themselves as one of the world's worst perpetrators of enforced disappearances."

It said local human rights groups had recorded more than 1,200 disappearances in the past five years alone.

This raised concerns about the heightened role of the army after the

King Gyanendra seized power on February 1, it said.

The king said his move was necessary to end the Maoist rebellion that has killed more than 11,000 people.

Earlier, Nepal's army Thursday repeated a claim that a top Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai has been expelled from the party's politburo and that the rebels have split over the issue.

"We have received most reliable and confidential reports that Baburam Bhattarai has been expelled from his party's politburo and retains only the party's ordinary membership," army spokesman Brigadier General Dipak Gurung told a press conference.

"Bhattarai was assigned to take charge of the Western Nepal region as the chief commandant under the name of Lalchoj but now all his front responsibilities have been given to Dev Gurung, another politburo member of the party," Gurung said.

Pakistan may send nuke parts to IAEA

REUTERS, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf said Pakistan is considering sending centrifuge components to the UN nuclear agency, which could enable the international watchdog to determine if Iran has been building an atomic bomb.

Diplomats familiar with a UN investigation into Iran's nuclear programme said this month that Pakistan had agreed to hand over the parts so UN inspectors could compare them with machinery sold to Iran by Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb program.

Musharraf told the private Aaj television channel, in comments made available on Friday, that Pakistan was in negotiations with the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on supply of the parts.

"We are considering and negotiations are under way and we will see," he said, when asked if the parts would be sent.

'Troubled triangle' may deepen US presence

AFP, Washington

Dogged by drug, terrorism and nuclear threats, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran are fast becoming a "troubled triangle" that could deepen US presence in the region, experts told a conference Thursday.

The problem is compounded by their strategic interests in each other's backyard, including Iran's strong influence in Afghanistan as Tehran strives to become a nuclear power, leaning toward Russia, China and India to create a strategic counterweight to the United States, they said.

Drugs in Afghanistan, the world's biggest producer of opium, is deeply tied to warlords, terrorists and drug mafias within the country.

The drug trade is fuelling Pakistan's booming heroin market and increasing addiction among youths, as well as social ills in Iran, the conference organised by the

Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington was told.

Terrorism is a major problem in the region, with the Afghanistan-Pakistan border a key hideout for the al-Qaeda network, including possibly terror mastermind Osama bin Laden.

Aside from being accused by the United States of having a covert nuclear weapons program, Iran has been blamed for backing terror groups in the region.

"Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran are a troubled triangle and the US strategy now is to involve the US government in the region in a way to reduce the troubled nature," said Larry Goodson from the US Army War College.

But while a long term American commitment can help Afghanistan wean itself from drug dependency and boost reconstruction of the war-wrecked nation, and restore

democracy to military-led Pakistan, it might fuel greater anti-American sentiment in the region, he warned.

"The US faces, as it does in Iraq, a real conundrum in that we have to stay in order to achieve strategic interest of stabilising and transforming these troubled regions but our very presence there is going to continue to attract some of the more militant jihadists who want to challenge their conception of the US project for the world," Goodson said.

"Anti-American attitudes are at an all-time high in some areas. We really can't stay and yet we dare not go," he said.

In the first salvo on its global "war on terror," Washington led an invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 to overthrow the hardline Taliban regime for backing al-Qaeda, which staged the deadly terror attacks on the United States.

Hariri killing probe flawed, says UN

REUTERS, United Nations

Lebanon's inquiry into the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri was seriously flawed and an independent investigation is needed to "find the truth," a UN fact-finding team said on Thursday.

In what could be the most damning piece of evidence, the team's report gave credence to alleged threats made at a meeting of "physical harm" by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Hariri prior to his Sept. 8 resignation as Lebanon's prime minister.

The report cited numerous accounts of the meeting between the two based on Hariri's statements to others. They had met to discuss extending the term of Lebanon's Syrian-backed President Emile Lahoud, which Hariri and Druze opposition leader Walid Jumblatt opposed.

Assad was quoted as saying he "would rather break Lebanon over the heads of Hariri and Jumblatt than see his word in Lebanon broken."



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri Muslim women relatives of slain Mohammed Akram, the brother of Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir Home Minister Abdul Rehman Veeri, grieve at his residence, at the village of Veeri some 55km south of Srinagar yesterday. Suspected Islamic militants shot dead seven people in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir including the elder brother of the Himalayan region's home minister, officials said.

MUSHARRAF SAYS India, Pakistan should talk all Kashmir options

PTI, Islamabad

Weeks before his meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Delhi, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said India and Pakistan should discuss options to resolve the Kashmir issue as agreed in the joint statement issued after their meeting in New York last September.

"There was a need now to start discussing the options. Otherwise, how are we going to move forward?" Musharraf, who will be in Delhi to watch the last one-day Indo-Pak cricket match on April 17 and also meet Singh, said.

The official news agency APP quoted him as saying that he would take up the Kashmir issue in his talks with Singh.

He said that the options to resolve the issue should be discussed as agreed in the September 24 joint statement issued after their meeting in New York last year.

'Peace bridge' for Kashmir bus service

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jammu

A crucial bridge in Jammu and Kashmir that will be used by the bus service linking the divided parts of Kashmir has been extensively repaired and named the "Aman Setu" or peace bridge.

This was announced Thursday by the Indian Army chief, Gen. J.J. Singh, who was visiting the state to inspect preparations for the bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad that is scheduled to start April 7.

The bridge near Uri forms a key link on the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road.

Singh said the bridge would help turn a new page in the history of India-Pakistan relations and open windows of opportunities and peace between the two nations.

The army chief was speaking to reporters at Rajouri, a border town 160 km north of winter capital Jammu, at the end of his daylong visit to Uri, Gulmarg and the Line of Control (LoC).

UNSC okays peacekeepers for Sudan

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Thursday approved 10,000 UN peacekeepers for Sudan to help shore up an accord that ended the country's north-south civil war.

The move comes after two months of diplomatic wrangling over how to handle a separate crisis in Sudan's troubled western Darfur region, amid fears the ongoing violence there could derail the north-south agreement.

Addressing the council, the head of UN peacekeeping operations, Jean-Marie Guehenno, welcomed the move but warned "serious political hurdles" and "unprecedented logistical obstacles" still confront the peace process in Sudan.

The new peace mission was given a mandate to monitor the north-south ceasefire, help with demobilisation and disarmament, give assistance to elections preparations and other tasks.



PHOTO: AFP

Workers sift through debris at the BP facility in Texas City 55km south of Houston Thursday after an explosion. The death toll from an explosion at the third-biggest oil refinery in the United States rose to 15 as investigators sifted through debris at the huge BP facility.

Lanka peace talks on 'backburner'

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's foreign minister ruled out an early resumption of peace talks to end a three-decade conflict with Tamil Tiger rebels but said a deal on disbursing tsunami relief was possible.

"A formal resumption of the peace process is very much on the backburner," Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told a meeting of the Foreign Correspondents' Association of Sri Lanka here late Thursday.

Kadirgamar however said the government could sign a deal brokered by Norway with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to provide a formula for distributing tsunami relief as long as it was not seen giving the rebels de facto recognition as a government.

The remarks came as President Chandrika Kumaratunga's administration faced pressure from its Marxist coalition partner, the JVP or People's Liberation Front, which is

opposed to any involvement of rebels in relief operations that could give them political recognition.

The Marxists initially warned they would pull out of the government if the rebels were given any official role in tsunami relief operations.

"What the JVP will do when it (the joint mechanism,) is signed and sealed, I do not know," Kadirgamar said. "Indications are that that they will voice opposition. If that opposition remains the same after they have seen the fine print, we do not know."

Peace talks have been stalled since April 2003. In April 2004, Kumaratunga won a general election with the support of the Marxists who oppose any moves to divide the country along religious or ethnic lines.

The previous government had broadly agreed to establish a federal state in Sri Lanka to resolve a long-running separatist conflict which claimed more than 60,000 lives between 1972 and 2002.

Tsunami food crisis averted in Asia: WFP

AFP, Bangkok

The starvation and malnutrition crisis feared after the tsunami struck the Indian Ocean in December has been averted in less than three months, the UN food agency said yesterday.

Emergency efforts are winding down, but the long-term reconstruction work continues with more than 1.75 million people in Asia and Africa receiving aid from the World Food Programme (WFP), mostly in Indonesia, Myanmar, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, the agency said.

"Our aim now is to help these poor people get a new start in life by drawing on the unprecedented support for tsunami relief from the public and private sector," Kenro Oshidari, WFP's deputy regional director for Asia said in a statement.

"We have an opportunity today to lift some communities from the vicious cycle of poverty and hunger that plagued their lives before the

Storms lash West Bengal: 18 dead Thousands homeless

AFP, Kolkata

Two days of gales and heavy rains left at least 18 people dead, 50 hurt and 7,500 homeless in India's West Bengal state, officials said yesterday.

Eight died in Burdwan, 200km west of Kolkata and another 10 in coastal villages strung along the Bay of Bengal on Wednesday and Thursday.

"We have received reports of the deaths. Relief has been sent to the affected places," said West Bengal relief minister Hafiz Alem Sairani.

The casualties included 30 children hurt when a school roof collapsed on Wednesday, he said.

Sairani announced that the families of the dead would be paid 70,000 rupees (1,625 dollars) each in compensation.

The minister said most people died when their makeshift homes were blown over. The homeless were being sheltered in schools.

He described a trail of devastation with trees uprooted and high tension power lines and telephone links down.

At least 22 people died Tuesday and Wednesday when tropical storms swept across neighbouring Bangladesh.

The thunderstorms hit 25 districts across the country late Tuesday and Wednesday and were accompanied by winds of up to 56km per hour that flattened thousands of thatched and tin houses.

The storms follow a tornado which ripped through 15 villages in northern Bangladesh on Sunday, killing at least 54 people.

Thunderstorms and strong winds are frequent at this time of year in the Bay of Bengal.

Sunday's tornado flattened some 3,000 homesteads and left over 8,000 homeless.