

Taiwanese stage mass rally to protest China's new law

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian and hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese took to the streets yesterday, waving banners and shouting slogans for peace and democracy to protest a new Chinese law threatening the island.

Demonstrators marched down 10 major streets in the capital, symbolising the 10 clauses of China's anti-secession law, before congregating for a rally in the presidential square outside Chen's office.

Wearing green headbands saying "Democracy, Peace, Protect Taiwan", marchers sang songs and waved placards condemning the law, which gives China's military the legal backing to invade should Taiwan move towards formal independence.

Replicas of tanks and missiles were also displayed to ridicule Beijing's military deployment against the island.

"Love Peace, Oppose War," some demonstrators shouted, many dressed in colourful costumes and marching behind musical bands.

"Say Yes to Taiwan, No to China" said one group of banners at the protest, one of the largest ever seen in Taipei.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators gather during an anti China protest in Taipei yesterday. Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian and hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese took to the streets, waving banners and shouting slogans for peace and democracy to protest a new Chinese law threatening the island.

US Army probe finds widespread Iraqi abuse

AP, Washington

Newly released government documents say the abuse of prisoners in Iraq by US forces was more widespread than previously reported.

An officer found that detainees "were being systematically and intentionally mistreated" at a holding facility near Mosul in December 2003. The 311th Military Intelligence Battalion of the Army's 101st Airborne Division ran the lockup.

Records previously released by the Army have detailed abuses at Abu Ghraib and other sites in Iraq as well as at sites in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The documents released Friday were the first to reveal abuses at the jail in Mosul and are among the few to allege torture directly.

"There is evidence that suggests the 311th MI personnel and/or translators engaged in physical torture of the detainees," a memo from the investigator said. The January 2004 report said the prisoners' rights under the Geneva Conventions were violated.

Top military officials first became aware of the Abu Ghraib abuses in January 2004, when pictures such as those showing soldiers piling naked prisoners in a pyramid were turned over to investigators.

US F-16 sale unlikely to shoot down Indo-Pak peace move: Analysts

AFP, Islamabad

India and Pakistan should be able to keep their fledgling peace process alive despite New Delhi's anger at the planned US sale of F-16 warplanes to nuclear rival Islamabad, analysts and officials said.

Washington said late Friday, in a major turnaround, that it had agreed to let Pakistan, a major ally in the US war on terror, buy the sophisticated fighter jets in the face of fierce objections from India.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed "great disappointment" when US President George W. Bush telephoned to inform him of the decision, fearing it could affect the balance of power on the subcontinent.

But Pakistan, which has fought three wars against India, apparently tried to soften the blow by pointing out the United States had said it was also ready to boost defence ties with New Delhi.

"We want good relations with

them. We have no objection if India gets anything, they can also buy the aircraft," Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid told AFP after the US announcement.

Relations between India and Pakistan have thawed since they launched a peace process 14 months ago, with the two countries rebuilding sporting ties, people-to-people contacts and transport links.

Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf is scheduled to watch a cricket match in the Indian capital and meet Singh next month in a further sign of détente.

But defence remains a sensitive topic, with India raising objections to the possible sale of F-16s to Pakistan during an Asian tour by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last week.

Singh brought up the concerns again when he talked to Bush on Friday, telling him the decision "could have negative consequences for India's security environment," said the prime minister's

spokesman, Sanjaya Baru.

However analysts said the South Asian neighbours, which split in 1947 after independence from Britain, would be able to overcome their differences about the so-called Fighting Falcon jets.

"This is part of the American effort to maintain a conventional balance between Pakistan and India," Rifkat Hussain, head of the strategic studies department at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University, told AFP.

The United States pointed out Friday that it would "respond positively" to an Indian request for information on a bid for F-16s, F-18s or other aircraft.

"An increase of US influence on both sides strengthens the peace process. Washington clearly wants a friendship between Pakistan and India," Hasan Askari, a defence analyst and former head of the political science department at Punjab University in Lahore, told AFP.

Maoists held secret meet in Delhi: Nepal

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Defying India's ban on them, Nepal's Maoist guerrillas held a secret meeting in New Delhi on Sunday to discuss the expulsion of three top leaders, Nepal's army said Thursday.

Royal Nepalese Army spokesman Brigadier-General Dipak Gurung told the media here that the Nepalese government has conveyed the matter to India. According to army reports, Maoists belonging to the north-west regional bureau of outlawed Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) met in the west Delhi locality of Narela, in Sector V Central Park, to discuss a circular the latest activities in the underground party. The circular confirmed the demotion of the deputy leader of the rebels, Mr Baburam Bhattarai, who was in charge of the central division, ranking next to the CPN (Maoist) supreme commander, Pushpa Kamal Dahak aka Prachanda.

Since last week, Nepal's state media has been reporting a rift among Maoists.

Seema Suraksha Bal officers, however, expressed concern over possible links between Maoists and Naxalites.

Nepal's army said Thursday: "We're not worried by the blockade of military aid as we have sufficient weapons in stock and the infrastructure to produce small arms and bullets by ourselves."

RICE SAYS

US building ties with both India, Pakistan

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice defended a US decision to sell F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan and elaborated on US efforts to build ties with both India and Pakistan at once, in a lengthy interview published by The Washington Post yesterday.

Although Rice discussed the new strategic approach with Islamabad and New Delhi in travels earlier this month, it was unveiled in the United States only Friday, by a US official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"What we're trying to do is to solidify and extend relations with both India and Pakistan at a time when we have good relations with both of them, something that most people didn't think could be done, and when they have improving relationships with one another," Rice told the Post.

"What we're trying to do is break out of the notion that this is a hyphenated relationship somehow, that anything that happens that's good for Pakistan has to be bad for India and vice versa."

There is likely to be concern on both sides, Rice noted, a day after Washington revealed plans for "a decisively broader strategic relationship" with India to help it become a major world power this century.

"What I talked about when I was in India was broadening and deepening our relationship for instance in defence cooperation, broadening and deepening our relationship in energy cooperation," Rice said.

Asked if that included nuclear power plants, Rice said "we're a step from that, certainly, but looking at their energy needs and trying to understand how they can be met."

She defended the decision to sell F-16s to Pakistan, whose leader, General Pervez Musharraf, ousted

an elected government in a bloodless coup three and a half years ago.

"Pakistan has come a long way, it's on a better trajectory than it's ever been, or that it's been in many, many years," she said.

"Our job is to support that trajectory and to help bring that along."

She said she was struck by the September 11 commission's recommendation to "invest in the relationship with Pakistan, because if you don't, you're going to create the same situation we created in the '90s," when Pakistan forged ties with the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Pakistan has been seeking additional multi-role fighter jets since 1990 when a deal for 40 such planes fell through because of US concerns over the country's nuclear programme.

India, Myanmar agree to keep border quiet

PTI, AFP, Yangon

Carrying forward the new momentum in bilateral ties, India and Myanmar yesterday emphasised that a stable security environment in the border area was a subject of mutual interest and a shared goal.

Visiting External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh, who called on the Head of State and Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Than Shwe, welcomed the Myanmar leadership to continue cooperating actively with India in this regard.

Recalling his visit to India in October last year, Than Shwe expressed satisfaction with follow up action taken by authorities in both countries since his trip.

Both sides had then voiced their firm determination to maintaining peace, stability and tranquillity along the entire length of their common border.

Myanmar had also reiterated that it would not allow insurgent activities against India from its soil. New Delhi has been concerned.

Neither side issued any remarks about the meeting. Afterwards, Singh left Yangon for the northern city of Mandalay, where he was to meet with the large Indian community that lives there.

The talks with Than Shwe followed Singh's meetings Friday with his counterpart Nyan Win and with Prime Minister Lieutenant General Soe Win, on a range of security, economic and development issues.

The two foreign ministers discussed "a broad range of issues relating to politico-economic developments in their respective countries," the Indian embassy said in a statement issued late Friday.

Singh told Nyan Win that India placed "high priority on its relations with Myanmar as a valuable neighbor and a strategic partner," the statement said.

"In particular, it was agreed that dialogue and concrete cooperation to counter terrorist activities in the border region would be further strengthened," it said.



PHOTO: AFP

Police break up a protest after people marched on the main Square in front of the government building in Ulaanbaatar, capital of Mongolia Friday. More than one thousand people marched in front of the Mongolian seat of government demanding more democracy in a protest inspired by the revolt in Kyrgyzstan, witnesses said yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan school children and women stand in a queue as they wait for a free lunch offered by a charity organisation yesterday at the tourist resort town of Hikkaduwa in southern Sri Lanka as the region marks the three-month anniversary of the December 26, 2004 tsunamis that killed nearly 400 people in the town.

India, China may sign deal on border row

REUTERS, New Delhi

India and China may sign an agreement during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to New Delhi in April outlining principles to resolve a border dispute over which they fought a brief war in 1962, a newspaper said.

Wen is slated to hold talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his four-day visit to India from April 9.

"India and China are expected to sign a 10 or 12 point agreement incorporating the political parameters and guiding principles of resolving their boundary dispute," the Hindustan Times said yesterday.

It said the two sides were keen not to disturb settled populations and take into account each other's security concerns.

The Asian giants appointed special envoys in 2003 to work on a solution to the decades-old dispute over the 3,500-km border. Another round of talks will be held in Beijing on March 30-31, ahead of Wen's visit.

Both countries, whose ties were frosty till the 1980s, have made little headway in secrecy-shrouded talks

over their disputed border but this has not affected ties in other areas.

"If this is true and if this is indicative of what Wen's visit is all about then it is very positive for the Sino-Indian relationship," security analyst Uday Bhaskar told Reuters.

"This has been in the pipeline but the fact that we have arrived or the suggestion is that there is a consensus is very welcome both for bilateral relations and for the profile that both China and India are seeking in the years ahead," he said.

India disputes Chinese rule over Aksai Chin, 38,000 sq km of barren, icy and uninhabited land on the Tibetan plateau, which Beijing seized from the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in the 1962 war.

China claims 90,000 square km of territory ruled by India in the eastern part of the border, mostly in Arunachal Pradesh.

The two countries are among the fastest growing economies in the world and their two-way trade soared to \$13 billion in 2004 from \$100 million a decade ago.

Kyrgyz revolt inspires Mongolians to protest

AFP, Ulan Bator

More than one thousand people marched in front of the Mongolian seat of government here demanding more democracy in a protest inspired by the revolt in Kyrgyzstan, witnesses said yesterday.

However the Friday protest, organised by the Just Society-Civic Movement (JSCM), was forced back by a strong police presence amid cries of "the struggle for democracy in Kyrgyzstan led to the victory."

Last Thursday crowds stormed the Kyrgyz White House compound housing the government and presidency in Bishkek and seized control of the government as discontent over earlier parliamentary elections boiled over.

Opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev was appointed acting president and prime minister after veteran leader Askar Akayev was forced to flee. The revolt has also raised fears of further rebellions in other former communist countries.

4 US soldiers killed in Afghan mine blast

AFP, Kabul

Four US soldiers were killed in an explosion in the southeastern Afghan province of Logar last morning when their vehicle convoy ran over a mine as they were surveying the area with Afghan soldiers, the US military said.

"Four US troops were killed in action but we have no indication that this was a new mine or an IED (improvised explosive device)," US military spokeswoman Cindy Moore told AFP.

She said the bodies of the US troops had already been evacuated from the area and an investigation was ongoing to determine the cause of the explosion, which occurred 40km southwest of the capital Kabul.

"The four soldiers were killed when their vehicle hit a mine, as they were moving in a three-vehicle convoy on a joint mission with the Afghan National Army," Moore said.

The patrol was surveying for a weapons range and they had been in the area a week and a half, she added.

The blast, which Afghan intelli-

gence sources said occurred in Mohammed Agha district in the Shikar Qala area of Logar could have been the result of unexploded ordnance as Afghanistan is littered with old mines after a quarter century of war.

Saturday's explosion brings to seven the number of US soldiers killed so far this year in Afghanistan.

A US soldier was killed in the western region of Herat in a mine blast earlier this month.

The US has more than 20,000 troops in Afghanistan, most of whom are battling insurgents in the south and southeast of the country where three years after the fall of the Taliban loyalists of the regime continue to wage an insurgency.

After a lull in violence during Afghanistan's bitterest winter for more a decade, attacks have begun to pick up as the weather warms.

A US soldier was killed and four others wounded in the western city of Shindand on March 16 in a blast, which killed eight Afghan civilians and wounded three others.

Kyrgyz leaders seeks to restore order

REUTERS, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan's new leadership sought to tighten its hold yesterday on the ex-Soviet Central Asian state gripped by lawlessness after the toppling of President Askar Akayev.

One man was killed trying to repel looters in the capital Bishkek, officials said, and automatic weapons fire could be heard overnight but there were fewer signs of the violence and chaos that accompanied widespread looting Thursday night.

The country's new leaders -- a loosely united opposition that includes many former government officials -- seized power when crowds of protesters clashed with police and marched into Bishkek's White House, the seat of government, Thursday.

"We completely control the situation in the country and in

Bishkek," opposition leader Felix Kulov, put in charge of security after his supporters broke him out of jail Thursday, said. "During the night there was only one murder."

Kulov has set up mobile police patrols and given orders for police to fire in the air to disperse looters.

Akayev, who had ruled since 1990, confirmed Friday he had left the country but did not say where he had gone.

He said he was still the legitimate president and his absence was only temporary. The opposition had carried out an "anti-constitutional coup," he said.

Acting president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, an opposition leader who played a central role in the protests against a flawed parliamentary election, appointed key interim ministers on Friday and said a presidential poll would be held in June.

Aga Khan honoured

PTI, Washington

The Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims and the head of one of the world's largest private development agencies, has received the prestigious 2005 Vincent Scully Award for his contributions to architecture and historic preservation in the Muslim world.

At a recent ceremony in the National Building Museum in Washington, the chairwoman of the museum's board of trustees, Carolyn Schwenker Brody, said the Aga Khan has been chosen for the 2005 Scully award "in tribute for the immense impact the Aga Khan is making, creating a beautiful window through which we can view the Muslim world." The Aga Khan has been a patron of Muslim architecture and urban planning since 1977 when he founded the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. With prizes of 500,000 dollars, it is the world's richest architectural award.

Lebanon opposition steps up pressure after UN report

AFP, Beirut

Lebanese opposition figures urged quick action yesterday on a UN call for an international probe into the killing of former premier Rafiq Hariri and a shakeup in the country's security apparatus.

"We appeal to the Security Council to quickly form a commission of inquiry that should have the broadest possible legal prerogatives to shed light on the assassination and judge those responsible," opposition MPs loyal to Hariri said in a statement.

A UN report issued Thursday was sharply critical of an investigation carried out by Lebanese authorities, concluding that their probe "has neither the capacity nor the

commitment to reach a satisfactory and credible conclusion."

It included that an "international independent commission" would be needed to determine who planned and carried out the attack on Hariri. But it said it was "more than doubtful" that such a panel could work effectively as long as the current heads of the Lebanese security services remained on the job.

"A sustained effort to restructure, reform and retrain the Lebanese security services will be necessary," the report maintained.

An outside investigation and the removal of Lebanon's security chiefs have been key demands of an emboldened anti-Syrian opposition in the weeks following the February 14 assassination of Hariri in a bomb blast here.

Schiavo in her last hours, says father

AP, Pinellas Park

A federal appeals court panel refused to order the reinjection of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube Friday, hours after the severely brain-damaged woman's father said she was weakening and "to her last hours."

In its ruling, a three-judge panel of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta said it had already ruled on most of the issues raised in the latest appeal, and that other issues raised did not apply to the case.

It marked the third time in four days the court had denied an emergency request made by Schiavo's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler. Attorneys for the parents said they planned to appeal, but would wait until Saturday morning.

Doctors have said Schiavo would probably die within a week or two of the feeding tube being removed, which was done March 18 after a judge sided with her husband's argument that she would not want to be kept alive artificially.

US asks Israel to end settlement expansion

Russia utters worry

REUTERS, AFP, Washington/Moscow

Israel's plans to expand a settlement in the West Bank is "at odds with American policy" and should come to a "full stop" because it could threaten progress toward peace with the Palestinians, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in an interview published on Friday.

US officials expected Israel "to be careful about anything" -- including settlements, new laws or the route of a barrier being built to separate Israelis from Palestinians -- that could affect the outcome of peace negotiations, Rice told the Los Angeles Times.

She said the United States noted its concerns in diplomatic meetings

this week with the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"We will continue to note that this (settlement expansion) is at odds with ... American policy. So, full stop," Rice said in the interview.

Meanwhile, Russia voiced concern over Israel's plans to construct more Jewish settlement blocs in the West Bank, slamming the move as contradicting the terms of the Middle East peace roadmap, the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Israel's announced plans to build more than 3,500 new homes between Maaleh Adumim (the most populous settlement in the West Bank) and Jerusalem cannot but give us concern," the ministry said in a statement made public late Friday.