



Former British PM Callaghan passes away

AFP, London

Former British prime minister and Labour Party leader James Callaghan died Saturday on the eve of his 93rd birthday, a family spokesman said.

Lord Callaghan was in power from April 1976 until May 1979, when his government was swept away by Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in the aftermath of a period of industrial unrest known as "the winter of discontent".

The family spokesman said Callaghan died at home in East Sussex, in southeast England.

PRANAB SAYS

India to consider buying US arms

REUTERS, New Delhi

India will consider buying military equipment from the United States, the defence minister said yesterday, two days after New Delhi protested against a US decision to sell F-16 fighter jets to rival Pakistan.

Washington announced Friday it was lifting a ban on sales of F-16 fighters to Pakistan -- imposed in 1990 as a sanction against its nuclear weapons program -- to demonstrate support for a major ally in the war on terrorism.

India expressed "great disappointment," saying it "could have negative consequences for India's security environment," but later added India and the United States had agreed to a series of steps to boost defence and energy ties.

The foreign ministry said as part of the agreement, Washington had

approved US defence companies to bid for combat aircraft that India might want to buy and was considering offering India technology for civilian nuclear energy.

"This is the first time we have received an offer from USA," Pranab Mukherjee told reporters. "Naturally, when the offer is there, it will have to be actively considered by the government of India keeping in view the requirements of our armed forces."

"Though earlier we used to have sometimes some equipment of high technology, never before an offer of such sophisticated equipment including planes and others were made which have been made now."

But he added: "One point I would like to emphasise, we have no intention of joining the arms race."

India and the United States were foes during the Cold War, and India

has traditionally bought military hardware from Russia, but in recent years the world's largest democracies have forged a new relationship, expanding defence and economic ties.

New Delhi has bought artillery finding radars from the United States that are being deployed on the Line of Control that divides disputed Kashmir with Pakistan, and is eyeing the Patriot missile systems as a deterrent to its nuclear-armed neighbour.

India has in the past relied heavily on French and Russian fighters but is now seeking to diversify.

Its MiG fighters, a legacy of close Cold War relations between Moscow and New Delhi, have also been controversial in recent years because of their numerous accidents.



PHOTO: AFP

An activist of the Nepali Congress is arrested by a riot policeman as he shouts slogans during an anti-King protest demonstration at Ratnapark in Kathmandu yesterday. At least seven people were arrested by the riot police while staging an anti-monarchy protest in defiance of a ban on public rallies.

2 ex-ministers among 7 detained during Nepali protest

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Riot police yesterday arrested another seven anti-monarchy activists, among them two former ministers, after they staged a protest in Kathmandu in defiance of a ban on public rallies, witnesses said.

Police pounced on the seven, all members of the Nepali Congress party, immediately they stepped out of a crowd and began shouting slogans such as "Down with reactionary forces", "Reinstate democracy" and "Long Live the Nepali Congress", the witnesses said.

The protestors, carrying Nepali Congress flags, staged the brief protest in the Ratna Park area of Kathmandu.

Among those picked up were former minister Mahadev Gurung and former junior minister Pushkar Ojha, the witnesses said.

Last week, at least 149 activists were arrested across Nepal for

protesting against the king, joining scores of others already in detention for showing dissent.

"Restore democracy," and "Withdraw the royal proclamation of emergency", the protesters shouted as riot police detained them.

King Gyanendra fired the government, assumed absolute powers in the Himalayan kingdom and put political leaders under house arrest or in jail.

The monarch said the move was necessary to crush a nine-year Maoist revolt in which more than 11,000 people have died.

Human right groups and political parties say hundreds of politicians, journalists and human rights activists had been jailed as the king's move has been widely criticised.

Big anti-king rallies have not been possible due to heavy security and small protests have been quickly subdued.



PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar's junta leader Senior General Than Shwe (L) reviews the guard of honour during the Armed Forces Day celebration in Yangon yesterday. Myanmar's junta leader Senior General Than Shwe vowed to press ahead with its controversial "road map" to democracy despite Western criticism, in a speech marking the day.

Yangon vows to restore 'disciplined' democracy

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta leader Senior General Than Shwe has vowed to work toward a democracy with "discipline" despite western criticism, as the military staged a show of force to mark Armed Forces Day.

The country's most powerful man spoke after inspecting more than 7,100 troops from the army, navy, air force and police in the sprawling and immaculately groomed Resistance Park in downtown Yangon, on the most important holiday for the military that has ruled since 1962.

In his annual speech, 72-year-old Than Shwe vowed to prepare for a democracy with "institutionalised discipline".

"The transition process constitutes a subtle and delicate but epoch-making revolution making a new order," Than Shwe said, referring to the junta's self-proclaimed "road map" to democracy.

"The nation needs reforms in all sectors -- political, economic, social and others -- to be well prepared for a democratic system with fully institutionalised discipline."

The junta's latest round of consti-

tutional talks, the first step on its self-declared road map, resumed in February to a chorus of criticism from western countries and the United Nations. They condemned the proceedings for failing to include Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the main opposition party.

The United States has identified Myanmar as an "outpost of tyranny" and imposed investment and trade sanctions on it.

The holiday marks the day in 1945 when General Aung San -- the leader of Burma's independence movement and Aung San Suu Kyi's father -- called on resistance fighters to expel Japanese occupying forces.

"Nowadays the preferred method employed by a major power to dominate and exploit a small country is political, economic or social subjugation rather than outright attack and occupation," Than Shwe said.

Myanmar's junta brutally crushed pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988 and two years later rejected results of national elections won by the NLD. Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest.

India sceptical about US offer

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Opinion in India seems to be divided on the qualitative aspect of the United States' offer to sell its Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA) F-16 and F-18 warplanes and civilian nuclear energy cooperation, officials and security experts said.

Security experts say while MRCA aircraft manufactured by American defence companies like the Lockheed Corporation are more sophisticated than the nuclear-capable F-16 planes the US has decided to transfer to Pakistan, the questions being asked are: (1) how much technology transfer will the US laws allow to India and (2) the prompt delivery of spares.

Officials say India's experience regarding the supply of defence spares has not been quite satisfactory forcing New Delhi to turn to Russia and its former incarnation the Soviet Union.

Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee had said earlier that India

would like to be assured of steady and timely supplies of spares before entering into any defence cooperation agreement with any country.

In a proposed Rs 43,000 crore deal for 125 aircraft, the Indian Air Force had earlier sought information on Mirage-2000 planes manufactured by French company

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Dassault, Gripen aircraft from Sweden and MIG-29 from Russia.

Security experts here said in the event of American companies being allowed to bid for IAF's planned purchases, only some will be manufactured in the US and the rest in Bangalore, India.

With regard to Indo-US cooperation in civilian nuclear energy sector, officials and experts said it remains to be seen to what extent Washington can travel given the existence of Nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty.

Secondly, if the US wants to enforce the safeguards in cooperation in civilian nuclear energy sector, it may give rise to sharp differences on the broader question of non-proliferation and export controls, they said.

While the US' readiness to upgrade its defence cooperation with India is in the realm of mere discussions fraught with divergence of opinion, what has happened in the case of Pakistan is the actual delivery of the F-16 planes, the officials pointed out.

They said defence cooperation with the US has always been a very sensitive issue in India and it is more so at present with the Left parties remaining as key pressure group despite their crucial support to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government.

In the light of this, it remains to be seen what effect the US decisions announced last Friday on Indian public opinion, especially the political class.

Sharon wins budget pledge to secure Gaza pullout

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cleared a major hurdle to a planned Gaza pullout, winning the support of a key opposition party for the state budget and avoiding an election that could have delayed the withdrawal.

In another boost for Sharon, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made clear Sunday Washington was sticking to its support for Israel's intention to retain large West Bank settlement blocs in a final peace deal with the Palestinians.

Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister Nabil Shaath voiced dismay at Rice's remarks and cautioned that Israel would use the Gaza withdrawal as cover for "stealing the rest of the territories, including Jerusalem."

Ending weeks of political uncertainty, Sharon wrapped up a deal Saturday with Yosef Lapid, head of the opposition Shinui party, to support the budget. Defeat in a parliamentary vote later this week

would have triggered a new election by law.

"The budget will pass now," Sharon was quoted as saying in the Haaretz newspaper after talks with Lapid at the prime minister's sprawling ranch in southern Israel.

Political commentators said the 264.5 billion shekel (\$61 billion) budget would now be approved easily despite opposition by rebels in Sharon's Likud party opposed to evacuating all 21 Jewish settlements in Gaza and four of 120 in the West Bank.

"Shinui's concern about implementing the withdrawal and continuing the peace process was the decisive factor," Lapid said after meeting Sharon.

Lapid's secular party, which has 15 legislators in the 120-member parliament, had threatened to vote against the budget over allocations to religious institutions linked to an ultra-Orthodox coalition member.

Under the agreement, the government will grant 700 million shekels (\$160 million) for Shinui priori-

ties such as higher education and allowances for reserve soldiers.

For opponents of the pullout due to begin in July, rejecting the budget was a means of delaying the withdrawal after failing in parliamentary and cabinet ballots to stop the first evacuation of settlements on land Palestinians want for a state.

Rina Ackerman, a Gaza settler, said she hoped for a miracle.

"With God's help, we are waiting for salvation. We don't know where it will come from," Ackerman said in the settlement of Neve Dekalim.

"You never know: suddenly two planes slam into two buildings. Who would have thought a day earlier that would have happened," she said, referring to the September 11, 2001 attack on New York's World Trade Centre.

In comments likely to bolster Sharon against criticism by pro-settler rebels in his party, Rice reaffirmed a public commitment he received last April from President Bush over his plans to retain large West Bank settlement blocs.

Troops kill 2 Kashmir rebel commanders

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops overnight shot dead two senior commanders of a dominant rebel group in revolt-hit Indian-administered Kashmir, a police spokesman said yesterday.

He said Ghulam Mohammed Malik and Mohammed Ashraf Padder were shot dead in separate clashes in northern Kupwara and southern Anantnag districts.

"Both were senior commanders of Hizbul Mujahedin and were on the security force list of most wanted militants," a police spokesman said.

Hizbul was one of the first rebel groups to launch an insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir in 1989.

It wants to secede Kashmir from India and join it with neighbouring Pakistan. Others among the dozen or so militant groups operating in Kashmir want the Himalayan region to be independent.

Kashmir is held in part by India and Pakistan but both claim it in full. They have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir but started a slow-moving peace drive in January 2004.

China's desire to lift EU arms embargo 'legitimate': Chirac

AFP, Tokyo

French President Jacques Chirac told a concerned Japan yesterday that China's desire for the European Union to lift its arms embargo was "legitimate" and would not entail exports of sensitive weapons and technology.

France has been a prime supporter of ending the ban on selling arms to China, a move opposed by both the United States and its ally Japan.

"The prime minister told me of his concerns. He asked me for explanations," Chirac told a joint news conference after talks with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

"I indicated to him that the decision of the European Union does not imply a change in exports of sensitive arms or technology to China as they are subject to rules which cannot be broken," Chirac said.

"Hence the decision does not mean things would change. It's a

political decision," he said.

"We believe that this lifting is legitimately sought by China and that's why we have taken this decision."

Koizumi reiterated Japan's opposition to lifting the embargo, imposed after China's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in 1989.

"We told the president that we are against it," Koizumi said.

"In China, military spending had seen double-digit growth for more than 10 years. As for Japan, the defense spending has been on decline over the past three straight years," Koizumi said.

"Japan does not regard China's economic growth as a threat. Rather we regard it as an opportunity. However, in relation to security concerns such as the Taiwan issue Japan has been asking for a peaceful resolution," Koizumi said.



PHOTO: AFP

Visiting French President Jacques Chirac (R) is greeted by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (L) prior to their summit meeting at the foreign ministry's Iikura Guesthouse in Tokyo yesterday. Chirac is in Japan for a three-day official visit.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai soldiers inspect damage from a train bomb attacks at Sungai Padi railway station, in Narathiwat province, southern Thailand yesterday. At least 15 railway workers, soldiers and police were injured in two bomb blasts and an hour-long gun battle in Thailand's restive south early yesterday, which police blamed on Islamic insurgents.

Bombing overshadows Easter in Beirut

REUTERS, Beirut

A bombing in a Christian suburb of east Beirut overshadowed Easter celebrations yesterday and raised fresh fears of a slide back into Lebanon's violent past.

Lebanese security forces picked through rubble and twisted metal left by Saturday's blast, the third in eight days in the Christian heartland, where resentment against Syria runs high.

Patriarch Nasrallah Butrous Sfeir, spiritual leader of Lebanon's Maronite Christians and a long-time critic of Syria's grip on Lebanon, told worshippers at Easter mass the Lebanese must now choose between freedom and violence.

"The holiday this year does not give the faithful worldly cheer," he said. "The incidents ... put (people) at a crossroads: either independence, sovereignty and freedom -- and that is what most Lebanese want -- or turmoil and difficulties."

The blast wounded eight people,

security sources said, most of them migrant workers from south Asia.

They said 25 kg (55 pounds) of high explosive had been planted between a Buick car and a car repair shop and exploded in the Sad al-Boushrieh industrial zone.

Lebanese opposition figures blamed the Lebanese security agencies backed by Damascus for the blast, which jogged memories of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war. They said the attacks would not deter their campaign against Syria.

Saturday, Lebanon's opposition, which blames Syria and its allies for the killing of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri on Feb. 14, urged the country's security chiefs to resign to make way for an international probe into the death.

A UN fact-finding report said Lebanon's own inquiry was seriously flawed and called for an international investigation.

Lebanon's pro-Syrian authorities have criticised the report but accepted an international probe.

"These criminal acts will not make the Lebanese reverse their march to sovereignty, independence and freedom," said prominent opposition lawmaker Nasib Lahoud.

"This crime is trying to force the Lebanese to choose between freedom and security."

By Sunday morning, strands of black smoke were still escaping from windows and water was trickling down walls. Firefighters had worked all night to extinguish blazes in four buildings.

The killing of Hariri, a Sunni Muslim, has cast Lebanon into its biggest political crisis since the end of the civil war.

The opposition seized on mass street protests to force the pro-Syrian government to resign last month and Damascus to bow to international pressure to withdraw its forces after 30 years.

Kyrgyz polls plan not 'realistic': OSCE

BBC ONLINE

Plans by the interim leader of Kyrgyzstan to hold presidential elections on 26 June are "unrealistic," Europe's key security body says.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's envoy to Kyrgyzstan, Markus Mueller, said it was too short a time to organise polls.

Interim leader Kurmanbek Bakiev proposed the date two days after President Askar Akayev was ousted.

Mueller said there were too many constitutional questions outstanding.

Bakiev announced his plans on Saturday in his first full news conference as acting president in the capital Bishkek.

But Mueller said: "I don't believe this is realistic because it's a very short period of time. There are still a lot of questions unresolved - constitutional questions."

The envoy would not give a date when he thought elections could be held - saying developments over the next few weeks would have to be taken into account.

"If it does not become quieter,

elections will just add to the instability," he said.

Akayev was ousted amid large-scale demonstrations following disputed parliamentary elections.

It remains unclear where the former president is, but many observers say he is probably in Russia.

Russia says it has offered to host Akayev, at his own request.

At his news conference, Bakiev said the events of the last week had taken him by surprise.

"It didn't enter my head that this could happen. God forbid that anyone should come to power in this way," he said.

He declared the revolution officially over, adding that it was time for action and restoring order.

The venue of Bakiev's news conference had to be switched after officials received information about an attempt to kill the interim president, his aides said.

Thousands of demonstrators supporting Akayev marched towards Bishkek on Saturday, but the country's new security chief, Felix Kulov, said that they called off their protest after failing to win broad support.