

## US AGENCY SAYS N Korea can mount warhead on missile

REUTERS, Washington

North Korea has the ability to mount a nuclear missile on a long-range missile and the communist state could hit US territory, the head of the US Defence Intelligence Agency said on Thursday.

The agency played down the statement by its director, Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, which appeared to break new ground, and said he was speaking theoretically, but it prompted expressions of deep concern from Democrats.

President Bush, asked about the assessment at a White House news conference, said it was not certain whether Kim Jong-il, President of the reclusive communist state, had developed the ability to arm missiles with a nuclear warhead.

But he said: "There is concern about his capability to deliver a nuclear warhead. We don't know if he can or not but I think it's best, when you're dealing with a tyrant like Kim Jong-il, to assume he can."

# Putin pledges aid for Palestinian forces

AFP, Ramallah

Russian President Vladimir Putin, on an historic visit to the Middle East, pledged military equipment and aid to the Palestinians yesterday to boost security and rebuild the shattered economy.

Putin, the first Kremlin leader to visit Palestinian territory and Israel, held talks with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas in the West Bank following a day of negotiations with Israeli officials and a two-day stop in Egypt.

"We support the efforts of President Abbas to reform the security services and fight against terrorism," Putin told a news conference.

"Russia will continue to offer aid to the Palestinian Authority to implement reforms and construct a state."

Despite Israeli complaints that Abbas is not doing enough to crack down on militant groups, Putin

confirmed that Russia would provide military training and equipment to Palestinian security forces.

"We will give the Palestinian leadership technical help and deliveries of (military) equipment and training," Putin said, promising "aviation technology" and helicopters would come first.

Alluding to Israeli fears, Putin said the Israelis understood that "today's Palestinian leadership should have the necessary resources."

Israel has also rebuffed a US proposal to arm Palestinian police officers in the West Bank to help put an end to the rampant lawlessness in the territory, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported.

"If we expect President Abbas to fight effectively against terrorism, we cannot expect him to do this with stones," Putin said.

In return, Abbas welcomed Putin's offer to host a conference on

the Middle East in Moscow in a bid to push forward the stagnant peace process. "The conditions are ripe," he said.

But Putin's offer to host such an event elicited only cool responses from the United States and Israel.

Abbas reiterated the Palestinians' commitment to the internationally drafted peace roadmap and said his government was willing to coordinate with Israel over this summer's pullout of troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip.

"We are committed to the implementation of a just peace with our Israeli neighbours and do not want to miss the opportunity which has presented itself."

Russia, along with the European Union, the United Nations and the United States, is a sponsor of the roadmap, a phased blueprint which aims for the creation of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel.

Putin also warned of the dangers

of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East while defending Moscow's nuclear cooperation with Iran.

"We are not against Iran using atomic technology for peaceful purposes and we think that the Iranian people have the right to modern technology in all fields."

Earlier, Putin laid a wreath at the tomb of veteran Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who died last November, after being greeted by a Palestinian guard of honour and being embraced by Abbas.

A few dozen Russian women looked on from outside the gates of the Palestinian leadership compound, welcoming Putin's arrival.

Abbas, who once lived and studied in Russia, used his first overseas trip after being elected Arafat's successor last January to visit Russia, which he said was testament to Russia's key role in the Middle East.



Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (R) welcomes Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) during the official welcome ceremony in Ramallah Friday. Putin yesterday became the first Russian leader to visit Palestinian territory where he offered aid for chairman Mahmud Abbas's threadbare security forces.



Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (L) is greeted by Indian school children and teachers during a visit to a Delhi Public School (DPS), in New Delhi Friday. Koizumi, who began a two-day visit to India, said the two Asian countries should cooperate as "true global partners" in what he termed as a "new Asian era."

## Top Tamil journalist shot dead

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government yesterday ordered a "full-scale investigation" into the slaying of a senior Tamil journalist who was abducted overnight as he left a restaurant here.

Sivaram Dharmaratnam, 46, a senior editorial board member of the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website, was grabbed by unidentified men around 10:30 pm (1630 GMT), colleagues reported.

Police said a bullet-riddled body found in the Colombo suburb of Talangama was identified as that of Dharmaratnam by his colleagues.

The government condemned the murder and vowed to bring the killers to justice.

"The government has ordered a full-scale investigation into the abduction and killing ... and law enforcement authorities will ensure speedy action," the government said in a statement.

Several Sri Lankan journalists have been killed in recent years, but not a single murder has been solved.

The government said the journalist's abduction and killing was the "latest in a series of violent acts and political killings" since a ceasefire between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels.

## Maoists end private school shutdown

### 10 rebels, 3 villagers killed in Nepali violence

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels called off yesterday a two-week shutdown of private schools following pleas from parents, students, human rights organisations and other groups.

Nepal's private schools outside the capital, Kathmandu, closed their doors earlier this month after bombs planted by the guerrillas exploded in empty schools following rebel warnings that they must shut. There were no casualties.

"With the withdrawal of the shutdown order, the private and boarding schools can resume classes from Friday," the chairman of All Nepal National Free Student Union-Revolutionary Lekhnath Neupane told AFP.

The Maoists had ordered the shutdown in a bid to force the schools to cut fees, scrap the singing of the national anthem and remove photographs of King Gyanendra as part of their drive to install their own "people's education" system.

Schools outside Kathmandu, where the Maoists have a major presence, headed the rebel closure order that marked their latest chal-

lenge to the authority of King Gyanendra, who seized power February 1.

But educational institutions in the tightly guarded capital functioned normally.

The shutdown affected 1.5 million students in 8,500 private and boarding schools across the country.

Earlier at least 10 Maoists were killed in security actions in different parts of Nepal over the past two days while rebels shot dead three villagers, army headquarters said Thursday.

One Maoist was killed in the Dharapani area of Sindhupalchowk in the country's east, three more including platoon commander Bhimmaya Pun Magar, alias Manmaya, were killed in Rolpa in the west, a military statement said.

Another two Maoists were killed in southwest Chitwan and four others were shot dead by security forces in far west Dialekh district.

Elsewhere, the military said three villagers were killed and 17 others - including an 18-month-old child and a 73-year-old man - were injured when about 100 rebels attacked villages in eastern Sindhupalchowk.

## INDO-PAK DAM ROW World Bank calls for appointing neutral expert

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Responding to a request by Pakistan, the World Bank has suggested the appointment of a neutral expert to resolve a dispute with India over a dam in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

"We have received a reply from the World Bank recommending the appointment of a neutral expert from a panel of three names," Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told reporters here on Thursday evening.

The World Bank said on Thursday that following a request from Pakistan government it has informed India and Pakistan of its intention to appoint a neutral expert under the terms of a 1960 water treaty brokered by the World Bank.

Pakistan had approached the World Bank on January 18 this year alleging the 450 MW Baglihar dam on Chenab river violates the 1960 treaty after talks between the two countries on the dispute ended in a deadlock.

India maintains it has not violated any provision of the Indus Water Treaty and had termed as "unjustified and pre-mature" Pakistan's approaching the World Bank saying it can be solved bilaterally.

The issue had figured during talks between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in Delhi on April 17.

## UN team in Lebanon to verify Syrian troop pullout

REUTERS, Beirut

A UN team arrived in Lebanon on Thursday to verify whether Syria had withdrawn all its troops and intelligence agents in line with a Security Council resolution.

In further signs of Syria's waning influence in Lebanon, the new government replaced the pro-Syrian police, justice and intelligence chiefs, who were forced out under pressure from Damascus's opponents, and removed the head of state security.

Syria told the United Nations on Tuesday it had ended its 29-year military and intelligence presence in its tiny neighbour and was in full compliance with resolution 1559.

But UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said he could not confirm that until the UN verification mission had checked it.

That team arrived in Damascus on Tuesday seeking maps of the bases Syria has abandoned in Lebanon and a final report on its pullout from Syrian officials.

The eight-member mission will visit former Syrian army and intelligence bases to check the last forces have indeed gone. It was not clear how long that process would take.

Syria entered Lebanon early in the 1975-1990 civil war and has dominated Lebanon militarily and politically since, incurring little

international opposition until the Security Council passed a resolution in September demanding it withdraw.

Pressure on Syria to end its grip mounted after the Feb. 14 killing of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, which many Lebanese blamed on Damascus.

The assassination provoked large street protests and an international outcry, prompting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to announce on March 5 that he would bring his 14,000-strong forces home. The pullout was completed in less than two months.

Another UN team met foreign and justice ministry officials on Thursday to make logistical preparations for an international inquiry into Hariri's killing in Beirut.

The Security Council ordered the international inquiry on April 7 after a fact-finding mission concluded that Lebanon's own probe into the killing was seriously flawed.

The report had also suggested that even an international probe would probably be unable to fulfil its mission while Lebanon's powerful pro-Syrian security chiefs stayed in office.

The cabinet named Saeed Mirza public prosecutor, Ashraf Reefi as internal security chief and George Khouri as head of military intelligence.

## FINAL DAYS OF CAMPAIGN

# Blair steers polls debate away from Iraq

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday tried to steer the election debate away from Iraq and back to domestic issues ahead of May 5, even as a mother who lost a son in the war pledged to take the government to court.

The main opposition Conservatives and smaller Liberal Democrats have used a controversy over whether Blair misled the public in the run up to the US-led invasion to score points in the election race.

But they too appeared keen to focus on other issues such as hospitals and the economy in the final six days of campaigning.

Blair and his more popular finance minister Gordon Brown unveiled a poster in London focusing on the economy that signalled with arrows the way forward with Labour and way back with the

Conservatives, declaring: "Economic stability. If you value it, vote for it."

"Today we return to the big and fundamental choice facing the country -- forward or back, the Labour government with a strong economy, economic stability, or back with a Tory government that will put that economic stability at risk," Blair told reporters.

"It's only if people come out and support us that the strong economy with investment in health and education and law and order continues," he said.

It was up to the public to decide whether to wake up to a Labour government or a Conservative government on May 6, said Blair.

Asked if he was feeling under pressure, the prime minister replied: "No, but I do think it's important that people understand how big and fundamental the choice is."

A senior Labour aide said earlier the party was keen to move on from

the "latest media frenzy on Iraq."

"So from now to May 5, we will be campaigning on the economy and public services, stepping up the time spent on the road," the aide said.

The launch of Labour's business manifesto Thursday, however, was overshadowed by a controversy over the full text of a secret piece of advice Blair received on the legality of the Iraq war that was leaked to the media.

The prime minister then published the 13-page minute from Attorney General Lord Peter Goldsmith in a bid to lay the matter to rest.

But as he attempted to push Iraq out of the spotlight, Rose Gentle, whose son died in the conflict last year, declared that she would take legal action against the government following the publication of Goldsmith's advice.



Labour Party leader Tony Blair answers a question during the BBC show "Question Time" Thursday in London. Blair, Conservative Party leader Michael Howard and Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy answered questions from members of the public on the show ahead of the May 5 general election.

## RAFSANJANI SAYS Iran will pursue nukes 'at all costs'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's powerful former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani insisted yesterday ahead of renewed talks with Europe that Tehran would pursue its atomic energy programme including uranium enrichment "at all costs".

"Iran wants to possess all the branches of nuclear technology, including enrichment, and it will do so at all costs," he said at the weekly Muslim prayers in Tehran.

"The Iranian nation ... considers itself strong enough to defend its rights, and not to let you (Europeans) impose any permanent suspension on uranium enrichment," said Rafsanjani, whose sermon was broadcast live on state radio.

"I am telling the Europeans that

their current effort of dealing with the nuclear case under US pressure will not bear good results," said Rafsanjani.

"We will be patient and we will continue these lengthy and fruitless negotiations until you are persuaded that we are not seeking the nuclear weapons," he said.

"I am talking to the Europeans and the US, and I am telling you that you are facing a strong Muslim nation, so instead of bullying us it is better to talk in order to remove ambiguities."

Both sides feel the nuclear negotiations are basically on hold until after the Iranian presidential elections in June, according to diplomats. Rafsanjani said Thursday he had still not decided whether to run in the polls.

## New Iraqi cabinet faces big challenges: Neighbours

AFP, Cairo

Officials and newspapers around the Middle East yesterday cautiously welcomed the new Iraqi cabinet, commenting on what one called its "painful birth" and pointing to the enormous challenges ahead.

There was almost universal agreement that Iraqis must work even harder to overcome ethnic and religious differences and to put an end to the insecurity that is plaguing their country.

After weeks of political deadlock led to the formation of a nearly complete cabinet, prime minister-designate Ibrahim Jaafari succeeded Thursday in getting approval from the new national assembly.

However, the two key portfolios of defence and oil have still to be filled, underscoring continuing manoeuvring by the minority Sunni Arabs, dominant under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, to get the best deal they can.

That view was expressed by Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit, who while welcoming what he called an essential step in the Iraqi political process, said the "jockeying (among the various communities) is going to carry on, and instability last, for some time."

Osama Saraya, editorial director at the government magazine Al-Ahram al-Arabi, said "we would hope for a political springtime in Iraq but, alas, the winter continues."

He criticised the weakness of Iraqi exiles who had returned following the fall of Saddam Hussein two years ago and their inability to govern.

Al-Bayan in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) spoke of a "hasty delivery by Caesarian" under heavy outside pressure, with "Washington openly intervening to bring it about" after almost three months of horse-trading since the January 30 elections.

The daily said the critical, short-term test for the new government will be to return security to the country.

"More long term, success will depend on its ability to speed up the withdrawal of occupation forces."