

Death could be a thing of past by 2050

AFP, London

Death could become a thing of the past by the mid-21st century as computer technology becomes sophisticated enough for the contents of a brain to be "downloaded" onto a supercomputer, according to a leading British futurologist. However, he told the Observer newspaper on Sunday, this technology might be expensive enough to remain the preserve of the rich for a decade or two more.

Among other eyebrow-raising predictions by Ian Pearson, head of the futurology unit at British telecommunications giant BT, is the prospect of computer systems being able to feel emotions.

"If you draw the timelines, realistically by 2050 we would expect to be able to download your mind into a machine, so when you die it's not a major career problem," he said.

"If you're rich enough then by 2050 it's feasible. If you're poor you'll probably have to wait until 2075 or 2080 when it's routine.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) listens to President Abdul Kalam (R) prior to Kalam's departure on a four-country tour, at New Delhi's Palam military airport yesterday. Kalam left for a 14-day trip to Europe, during which he will pay state visits to Russia, Switzerland, Iceland and Ukraine.

North Korean ships in South to pick up aid

AFP, Seoul

North Korean cargo ships yesterday arrived in South Korea for the first time in two decades to take fertiliser aid back to the impoverished communist state, officials said.

The unification ministry here said the North sent three ships into South Korean waters overnight. They are due to return home on Wednesday with their consignments of fertiliser.

Escorted by South Korean navy and coast guard boats, the ships began docking one-by-one at three different ports on the South's southern and western coasts, according to maritime police.

It is the first time since 1984, when Pyongyang supplied cement to South Korea by sea after a devastating typhoon, that Seoul has allowed ships from the North to dock at its ports.

Thousands of tonnes of bagged fertiliser awaited shipment from a pier at Ulsan, 410km southeast of Seoul, Sunday when one of the three ships first anchored off the coast, witnesses said.

EU renews pressure on Uzbekistan

AFP, Brussels

The European Union is set to renew pressure on Uzbekistan today to allow a full independent probe into a military crackdown feared to have left hundreds dead.

EU foreign ministers will reiterate their deep concern over events in the ex-Soviet republic at regular monthly talks, which will also notably discuss Iran ahead of crunch nuclear talks with Tehran later in the week.

"They will express profound concern, both over the loss of life and the displacement of people" said an EU official following the crackdown in the eastern Uzbek city of Andijan.

President Islam Karimov claims his government deployed military force as an emergency response to an attempt by dozens of armed Islamic extremists supported by local residents to overthrow the government last week.

Taliban still a viable resistance force: US

12 Afghan insurgents killed in fighting

AP, AFP, Washington/ Kabul

American commanders say the Taliban is a viable resistance force in Afghanistan even three years after the Islamic radicals fell, but the US military's fight to undermine their influence and bring stability is showing signs of progress.

The assessment follows a stretch in which US troops in Afghanistan have been killed at a higher rate than those in Iraq, where there are about eight times as many American soldiers and where the situation is widely perceived as more dangerous.

Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, plans to meet President Bush at the White House today. It will be his first Washington visit since his inauguration in December as Afghanistan's first democratically elected president.

Combat in Afghanistan has

intensified in recent weeks, as expected, after a winter lull. US commanders, however, say they think their plan for improving security including the expansion of Afghan army, border patrol and police forces is on track.

On Sunday fighting between insurgents and US-led coalition and Afghan forces in the country's troubled east left 12 rebels dead and one US soldier slightly wounded, the US military said.

The clash occurred Saturday in Paktika province, which borders Pakistan, said US military spokesman Lt. Col. Jerry O'Hara.

"It was clearly the insurgents who fired upon us first," he said.

O'Hara said the 12 were killed by a combination of direct fire from troops on the ground and coalition attack aircraft.

Brig. Gen. Greg Champion, a deputy commander of Combined

Joint Task Force 76, said in a telephone interview Friday from his headquarters at Bagram airfield that the recent increase in insurgent violence was due mainly to a more aggressive approach by American and Afghan forces.

"We have not taken a posture of waiting" for the Taliban to begin their usual spring offensive, he said. Instead, US and Afghan forces have been "going on our own offensive."

Insurgent attacks continue, however.

Suspected Taliban militants gunned down six Afghan employees of a US-funded anti-drug project in southern Afghanistan on Thursday. Also, an Italian aid worker was kidnapped this past week in Kabul, the capital, adding to the fears of relief groups that are vital to the reconstruction effort.

The US has about 16,700 troops in Afghanistan, with 22 allied nations

contributing an additional 1,600. Nato operates a security force of about 8,000 international troops.

As a proportion of their total numbers, US troops in Afghanistan recently have been dying at a slightly higher rate than in Iraq, where there are about 135,000 troops.

Since early March, 27 American military personnel have died in Afghanistan, according to Pentagon figures, or about 1.6 per 1,000; the latest death came from a bombing Saturday, with a purported Taliban spokesman claiming responsibility.

During the same time period in Iraq, at least 124 have died, a rate of about 0.9 per 1,000.

Karzai has said he will press Bush for a "strategic partnership" with the US encompassing long-term political, economic and military assistance.

COMPLETION OF ONE YEAR IN POWER

India stays the course of economic reform

AFP, New Delhi

Twelve months ago, after India's Congress party backed by its communist allies scored a surprise election win, the Mumbai stockmarket plunged 11 percent as rattled investors raced for the exits.

Since that dramatic day May 17, 2004 -- which traders dubbed "Black Monday" -- the market has rocketed 44 percent.

Analysts say the recovery shows that while Premier Manmohan Singh's government has taken no bold steps during its first year in office, it has kept economic reforms ticking, despite loud objections from

the communists.

The rout of the market-friendly Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had prompted investor alarm that reforms would stall in one of the world's fastest growing economies.

"The government has done a great balancing job with the Left in the framework. It has kept reforms broadly on track, said Dharendra Kumar, chief executive of Value Research, a leading Indian mutual fund tracker.

"But in the sense of rapid-fire, big reforms, it has not been able to do as much given the constraints."

The ruling 20-member centre-left

coalition relies on the support of 61 communists members of parliament to stay in power.

After the government took power May 22, 2004, great enthusiasm greeted the "dream team" of Singh and Finance Minister P. Chidambaram.

Singh was known as India's liberator for opening up its inward-looking economy as finance minister in the early 1990s. Chidambaram propelled reforms further in the mid-1990s during an earlier avatar as finance minister.

3 Romanian journalists freed in Iraq

AFP, Bucharest

Three Romanian journalists and their guide have been released in Iraq after being held hostage there for almost two months, the government said yesterday in Bucharest.

"The three journalists and their guide are safe and well and have been under the protection of the Romanian authorities since 1:44 pm local time" or 1044 GMT, said Adriana Saitoiu, a spokeswoman for President Traian Basescu.

"The four will be returning to Romania in the very near future," she added.

The Romanians, a woman and two men, were abducted on March 28 in a suburb of Baghdad, along with their guide, a businessman with both Iraqi and US citizenship.

Their kidnappers, a group calling itself the Muadh Ibn Jabal Brigade, had at one point threatened to kill the hostages if Romania refused to announce the withdrawal of its 860 troops from Iraq by April 27.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Russia, US jockey for place in Uzbekistan

AFP, Moscow

On the face of it, Russia and the United States seem to be of like minds on how to respond to a military crackdown in Uzbekistan that left hundreds of civilians dead and to fresh instability in the region.

But behind the scenes, it is their differences that Moscow and Washington are honing as they engage in a quiet but fervent contest of their own to influence the course of events in Uzbekistan and project power more deeply into Central Asia, experts say.

In the past week, Moscow and Washington have joined numerous other countries and institutions in turning up the heat on Uzbekistan's autocratic President Islam Karimov, whose regime they have both

supported in their own ways. They have also agreed that the recent killings require investigation.

But in contrast to demands from European Union countries for an "international, independent" probe -- demands that Karimov has shown little enthusiasm to meet -- the language from Moscow and Washington has been attenuated, focusing on a "credible" probe with "international participation."

The disparity, experts say, reflects differences in the strategic objectives pursued by Russia and the United States in Central Asia as opposed to those pursued by Europe, as well as the wariness with which Moscow and Washington are watching each other to see who moves first, and how.

"Both Russia and the United

States want Uzbekistan in their camp," said Yevgeny Volk, a strategic analyst with the Heritage Foundation think-tank in Moscow.

"And neither wants to destabilise the Karimov regime."

For Russia, Karimov represents a familiar order that has long safeguarded and promoted Russian economic, military and political interests in a critical part of the world on the border separating Russia from sources of instability on the Indian subcontinent and in the Middle East.

For the United States, Karimov is a vital partner in the US-led "war on terrorism," who agreed to let Washington open an air base in his country, in a critical region representing a frontier outpost for US military presence and international influence.

Iran issues warning to Europe

AFP, Tehran

Iran warned Britain, France and Germany yesterday against pushing for the Islamic republic to be referred to the UN Security Council over its nuclear programme, saying such a step would spark "a crisis over which the Europeans would have no control".

Speaking ahead of high-level crisis talks due to be held in Brussels and Geneva this week, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi also warned it would take "unilateral decisions" if it faced diplomatic punishment.

"It is not legally possible to refer our case to the UN Security Council. Many countries believe there is no legal basis for it. So if one country pressures others to do it, they will be the losers, not the Islamic republic of Iran," he told reporters.

"We have taken the necessary

measures and we are not afraid of being referred to the UN Security Council," he said, asserting again that "the decision regarding Isfahan is irreversible".

Iran agreed in November with Britain, France and Germany to suspend its uranium conversion and enrichment activities, which Washington believes conceals its nuclear armament intentions.

However the Islamic republic is seeking to resume uranium conversion at a plant near the central city of Isfahan, a move that would violate its deal with the EU-3 and leave it facing the threat of UN Security Council action.

Asefi said that if the Europeans went ahead with pushing the dossier to New York, "it means that an issue that could have been solved with negotiations has become a crisis over which the Europeans have no control."



PHOTO: AFP
Thousands of Indonesian Muslims march toward the US embassy during a demonstration in Jakarta yesterday over the alleged desecration of the Quran by US soldiers at Guantanamo Bay military base. Hardline Indonesian Muslims at the rally vowed to wage war against the US.

Bush admn accused of hypocrisy over Quran abuse

AFP, Washington

The US government, which has called Newsweek magazine to account over a discredited article alleging US soldiers desecrated the Quran at Guantanamo Bay military base that set off deadly violence, should try and clean up its own act, some politicians and US commentators say.

Critics remind the US administration of how it used imprecise information to justify the war in Iraq, pointing out what they see as unconvincing inquiries into other alleged abuses at Guantanamo and Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison where serious abuses of prisoners occurred last year.

The State Department called the Newsweek article "appalling" and liberally mentioned the "very major problem" caused to Washington in the Muslim world.

Separated twins 'doing well'

REUTERS, Singapore

The 15-month-old Indonesian conjoined twin girls successfully separated in a risky operation woke up smiling yesterday and were recovering well, doctors in Singapore said.

Anjeli and Anggi, who were born with three legs and shared intestines, were fully conscious after Saturday's 10-hour operation in Singapore's Gleneagles Hospital.

"They are doing very well. They both woke up this morning and were smiling at their parents and doctors," said Tan Kai Chah, one of the leading surgeons in the 15-member operating team.

One twin had been taken off the respirator and was breathing on her own. The other was likely to be taken off the breathing apparatus in a day, he said.

But doctors said the girls were not yet out of danger as post-operative complications could still arise. One of the twins also has a heart defect.

The surgeons' task was complicated by the need to divide shared internal organs between the sisters.

"It wasn't clear at all until late into the operation who was going to get what," said Edward Kieley, another surgeon.

Because the girls' intestines were joined, doctors had to ensure that each child had properly functioning digestive sys-



PHOTO: AFP
File photo dated May 21 shows Indonesian 15-month-old conjoined twins Anggi and lie Anjeli lying on a hospital bed before the operation at the Gleneagles Hospital in Singapore. Indonesian twin girls born conjoined at the hip and abdomen were "doing very well" after they were surgically separated yesterday.

tems by assigning different sections of bowels between the two.

The twins, born in the rural Indonesian province of Medan to a snack vendor and his wife, were left with one functioning leg each.

Wealthy Indonesians paid for the \$450,000 (\$270,000) operation, while some of the surgeons also waived their fees.

The twins, who arrived in the city-state in February, underwent a string of medical tests before the surgery.

Due to their limited mobility, conjoined twins can suffer from a host of medical problems, including blood clots and pressure sores.

Conjoined twins occur roughly once in every 50,000 births and

once in every 200,000 live births. Many of those born alive do not live long. For twins who undergo surgery, one often dies after the operation and the rate of survival beyond the age of two is just 20 percent.

This is the fourth operation in Singapore to separate foreign-born conjoined twins.

Sunni mosques close to protest Iraq killings

AFP, Baghdad

Sunni Arabs have closed their mosques for three days to protest a spate of killings in which three of their clerics died, as Iraqis reacted with shock to intimate jail photos of ousted president Saddam Hussein.

From the minarets of Baghdad, Sunni muezzins issued their five-times-a-day call to prayer but added: "Remain where you are at say your prayers."

The mosques were closed to protest recent unexplained murders of civilians and clerics from the long dominant minority community.

Some Sunni leaders have blamed the murders on a Shia militia with links to the government. Around 1,000 Sunni figures -- clerics, officials and notables -- met Saturday to demand the dismissal of Interior Minister Bayan Baqer Solagh, charging that security services under his control were behind the killings.

"We call for the creation of an independent investigation team to look into the murders (and) the torture of detainees and we demand the interior minister's dismissal," said a statement after the meeting.

But the Shia minister rejected the accusations from a community that overwhelmingly boycotted the January general elections and is widely believed to provide the main backbone to the ongoing insurgency.