

China's military buildup a threat to Asian security

N Korea must be persuaded to resume talks, says Rumsfeld

AP, AFP, Singapore

China's military buildup, particularly its positioning of hundreds of missiles facing Taiwan, is a threat to Asian security, Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said yesterday. Rumsfeld rebuked China at a regional security conference here, saying it was pouring huge resources into its military and buying large amounts of sophisticated weapons despite facing no threat from any other country. The Pentagon chief's remarks signalled a harder line against China from the Bush administration, which has criticised Beijing over trade and human rights issues but not directly challenged its military buildup. The director of the Asia bureau of China's foreign ministry, Cui Tiankai, was in the audience for Rumsfeld's speech and reacted strongly.

"Since the US is spending a lot more money than China is doing on defence, the US should understand that every country has its own security concerns and every country is entitled to spend money necessary for its own defence," Cui told The Associated Press after Rumsfeld's remarks. Rumsfeld said the Pentagon's annual assessment of China's military capabilities shows China is spending more than its leaders acknowledge, expanding its missile capabilities and developing advanced military technology. China now has the world's third-largest military budget, he said, behind the United States and Russia. He did not say how large the US believes China's military budget is. "Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment? Why these continuing large and expanding

arms purchases?" Rumsfeld said at the conference organised by the International Institute of Strategic Studies, a private, London-based think tank. Cui responded sharply to Rumsfeld during a question-and-answer session. Meanwhile, Rumsfeld conceded yesterday he had no idea how North Korea might be persuaded to resume negotiations on its nuclear weapons programme as allies debated the next steps if Pyongyang continues to shun six-party talks. "I have no way of knowing what might conceivably finally persuade the people in the North to behave in a way that is more consistent with the behaviour of other countries in the world," Rumsfeld told an international conference on Asia security.

Two US soldiers killed in Afghan bomb blast

REUTERS, AFP, Kabul

Two US soldiers were killed in a bomb blast in Afghanistan, the military said yesterday, capping a bloody week in which more than 60 people died in a wave of violence, including a mosque bombing that was the country's worst attack in two years. The two soldiers were killed and a third wounded in insurgency-wracked southeastern Paktika province when an improvised bomb exploded as their vehicle was passing, the US military said in a statement. An Afghan interpreter was also wounded in the blast. The wounded were evacuated to a US military base at Salerno in neighbouring Khost province, the statement said. In a separate attack in southern Zabul province, two Taliban were killed and four wounded during an hour-long gun battle after they ambushed a police convoy. Nearly 150 US troops have been killed in Afghanistan since in the operation launched in late 2001 that toppled the former Taliban regime after it failed to hand over al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden, wanted for the September 11, 2001 attacks in Washington and New York.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Minister for Kashmir Affairs Faisal Saleh Hayat (3R) shakes hands with chief of All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Mirwaiz Umar Farooq (C) while senior leaders Abdul Ghani Bhatt (L), Maulvi Abbas Ansari of Tehadul Muslimeen (2L), head of the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, Yasin Malik (R) and Bilal Ghani Lone of the People's Conference (2R) look on prior to their meeting in Islamabad yesterday.

Kashmiri leaders visit Islamabad despite Indian objection

REUTERS, Islamabad

Separatist leaders from Indian Kashmir arrived for talks in the Pakistani capital on Saturday, shrugging off India's objections to their travel beyond Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. A delegation of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, the main political separatist alliance, crossed into Pakistani Kashmir on Thursday for an historic visit that was another sign of slowly improving relations between South Asia's nuclear rivals. But the Indian government objected to their plans to travel outside Pakistani Kashmir, saying it had an understanding with Islamabad that those using a new bus service the group used for their trip should restrict their travel to Kashmir. Pakistan argues that the separatist leaders are not ordinary bus passengers and enjoy "special status". There was no immediate Indian reaction to the arrival of the delegation in Islamabad.

KASURI SAYS Musarraf may contest '07 polls as civilian

ASIAN NEWS INTERNATIONAL, Islamabad

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri has said that if President Pervez Musharraf decides to contest the 2007 general elections, he would do so as a civilian and not as an army chief. President Musharraf will give up his uniform if he decides to contest the 2007 polls, The News quoted Kasuri as saying in an interview with an Indian TV channel. Kasuri said he himself was not in favour of a President with uniform. "I'm not in favour of a President with uniform... look at our special circumstances," he added. **Abbas delays election** AFP, Ramallah



PHOTO: AFP
Lebanese mourner carry the coffin of slain columnist Samir Kassir, 45, who regularly wrote virulent articles against Syria's domination of Lebanon, during his funeral in central Beirut yesterday as a poster depicting him as the "Martyr of the Independent Uprising" is brandished on the headquarters of An-Nahar daily. Kassir's killing, like that of the February 14 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, has widely been blamed on the pro-Syrian regime and Damascus, both of which have denied the accusations.

'Suicide bombings linked with occupation, not religion'

REUTERS, Washington

Asurge in suicide attacks in Iraq and elsewhere around the world is a response to territorial occupation and has no direct link with Islamic fundamentalism, according to the author of a new book who has created a database of such bombings over the past 25 years. Robert Pape, associate professor of political science at the University of Chicago, said most suicide terrorists were well-integrated and productive members of their communities from working-class or middle-class backgrounds. "Technicians, waitresses, security guards, ambulance drivers, paramedics... few are criminals. Most are volunteers whose first act of violence is their very own suicide attack," Pape told Reuters in an interview. A broad misunderstanding of the issue, he said, is taking the US-led war on terrorism in the wrong direction and could in fact be fuelling an increase in suicide terrorism. Pape has created what he calls the first comprehensive database on every suicide terrorist attack in the world since 1980, using Arabic, Hebrew, Tamil and Russian-language sources. The US Departments of Defence and Homeland Security, as well as

US confirms Quran abuse by soldiers

AP, Washington

US military officials say no guard at the Guantanamo Bay prison for terror suspects flushed a detainee's Quran down the toilet, but they disclosed that a Muslim holy book was splashed with urine. In other newly disclosed incidents, a detainee's Quran was deliberately kicked and another's was stepped on. On March 25, a detainee complained to guards that "urine came through an air vent" and splashed on him and his Quran. A guard admitted he was at fault, but a report released Friday evening offering new details about Quran mishandling incidents did not make clear whether the guard intended the result. In another confirmed incident, water balloons thrown by prison guards caused an unspecified number of Qurans to get wet, and in a confirmed but ambiguous case, a two-word obscenity was written in English on the inside cover of a Quran. The findings, released after normal business hours Friday evening and after the major TV networks had aired their evening news programs, are among the results of an investigation last month by Brig. Gen.

India to set free Ulfa leaders if it accepts talks with Delhi

AFP, Guwahati

India's northeastern state of Assam said yesterday it would accept a major rebel group's demand to free four of its jailed leaders if the outfit agreed to peace talks with New Delhi. "We're ready to release some jailed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) leaders," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi said in Assam's main city, Guwahati. "We're prepared to walk the extra mile to facilitate talks with Ulfa." Last Monday the outlawed group, which has been battling for an independent homeland in Assam since 1979, demanded the release of four jailed leaders as a precondition to holding talks with the Indian government. The government has formally invited Ulfa for talks aimed at ending years of deadly insurgency in the region. "We require at least 10 members of our central committee to discuss New Delhi's offer for holding talks. Right now only six members are free and the rest are in jail," Ulfa com-

mander-in-chief Paresh Baruah said in a statement. "We want four of our central committee leaders released unconditionally to enable us to sit together and discuss the government's offer for talks." At least 10 top Ulfa leaders are in prison in India. Gogoi said the state government was keen to grab the chance for peace. "We don't want to put any hurdles (in the way of talks) and simply want them to come to the negotiating table," the chief minister said. "There's a definite forward movement in the peace process. This is the first time Ulfa has softened its stand and talked of peace negotiations," he said. The Ulfa is considered one of the most organised rebel armies in India's revolt-hit northeast with an estimated 3,000 guerrilla fighters. Over 10,000 people have died in insurgency-related violence in Assam in the last two decades.

India, US worried as Tigers build air force

REUTERS, Colombo

Both India and the United States are concerned about reports that Tamil Tiger rebels are seeking to build up an air force, Sri Lanka said after a state visit to India by President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh voiced "concern", while US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "took serious note" during a separate briefing in Washington by foreign ministry officials, the Sri Lankan government said. "Particular concern was expressed over the illegal acquisition of air capability," the governments of India and Sri Lanka said in a joint statement issued late on Friday, a day after the two South Asian leaders met in New Delhi. Sri Lankan officials also discussed the possibility of suicide air attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during talks with US security officials in Washington.

"She (Rice) said the US government took serious note of the LTTE's acquisition of air capability," Sri Lanka's Washington mission said in a statement on Saturday. Nordic monitors of a 2002 ceasefire have flown over the rebels' airfield in the island's north, but cannot confirm intelligence reports that the Tigers have assembled two light aircraft from smuggled components. The Tigers, whose two-decade war for self-rule killed over 64,000 people until the truce pushed their struggle into limbo, have not given the Nordic Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission access to the airfield. The rebels refuse to discuss whether they have aircraft. "Air assets in an organisation like the LTTE means a hell of a lot militarily-wise because we're talking about asymmetric warfare," chief monitor Hargrup Haukland said in late May. "Those two aircraft, if they have any, represent a very serious threat."



PHOTO: AFP
Aymara peasants block the highway between La Paz and El Alto during a 48-hour strike, called by the La Paz Drivers Federation Friday. President Carlos Mesa's bid to defuse weeks of unrest over who will profit from impoverished Bolivia's vast natural gas resource, so far has failed as demonstrators blocked roads demanding nationalisation.