

US holds one-to-one talks with N Korea

AFP, Beijing

The United States and communist North Korea held a rare one-on-one meeting yesterday, with the American side stressing it was time "real progress" was made in ending the North's drive for nuclear weapons.

The contact came a day before the reopening of six-nation talks on North Korea's nuclear arms programmes that were broken off last year.

With Washington hinting it might soften its tough stance on North Korea to break the deadlock when the talks resume Tuesday, top US negotiator Christopher Hill said the two sides needed to review the situation.

"I want to stress these are not negotiations. We are just trying to get acquainted, to review how we see things coming up and compare notes," Hill told reporters before the 75-minute talks started.

It was the first time that the US and North Korea have held bilateral contacts before the six-party process, which seeks an end to the

North's nuclear arms drive in return for diplomatic and economic benefits.

The six-way talks have been held three times before, ending inconclusively each time.

North Korea abandoned the talks last year and has since claimed it already possesses nuclear weapons, heightening tension over what the International Atomic Energy Agency calls the world's most dangerous nuclear proliferation issue.

"We have to produce an agreement this time. There was a dialogue conscious of such a goal," a South Korean government official said after his nation's talks with the US delegation.

In a flurry of diplomacy before the formal opening of the talks, North Korea met South Korea on Sunday and Russia on Monday while the United States sat down with the other nations in the six-way negotiations, China and Japan.

Hill said the purpose of the

bilateral meetings was to "make sure we're all in agreement that we need to make some real progress".

"This is a very important round of the six-party process and we need to really push as hard as we can," he said after meeting the Japan delegation.

With no progress in the previous rounds of talks, the United States has signalled greater flexibility as it enters what is considered a crucial round after the 13-month deadlock.

A change in US rhetoric, including President George W. Bush's polite reference to the North Korean leader as "Mister Kim Jong II," helped woo the Stalinist regime back to the bargaining table.

Bush had previously lumped North Korea in with Iran and pre-war Iraq as an "axis of evil."

On arrival Sunday, Hill stopped short of predicting any immediate success but said his team was "ready to roll up our sleeves and do our best to make sure we achieve some progress".



Egyptians light candles and lay flowers in front of the destroyed Ghazala Garden hotel Sunday. Over 500 people participated in a peace rally against terrorism in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh after the string of bomb attacks.

Bombs hit Baghdad as Australian PM makes surprise visit

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

The Iraqi capital was hit by twin suicide car bombs yesterday that killed at least nine people as Australian Prime Minister John Howard, a top US ally, made a surprise visit to Baghdad.

Sunni Arabs also Monday ended their boycott of talks on drawing up a post-Saddam Hussein constitution, which had threatened to delay a key stage in the country's political transition.

The latest bombings came less than less than 24 hours after a massive truck blew up outside a police station in the capital on Sunday.

Monday's first bombing targeted the Al-Sadeer Hotel in central Baghdad, which is used by foreign security personnel, an interior ministry official said.

Most of the six killed and 16 wounded were hotel security guards as the bomber exploded the car at the gates to the hotel, which has been bombed in the past.

Just over two hours later, another car bomb targeted a police commando patrol under the Harithiyah bridge in the west of the city, killing two policemen and wounding 11.

The attacks followed Sunday's massive suicide truck bombing against a police station in the southeast of the capital that killed 40 people, many of them policemen. Thirty-three people were wounded.

The explosion outside the Al-Rashid police station in the Al-Mashtel neighbourhood left a huge crater in the street, damaged or destroyed 22 cars, and set ablaze 10 shops and a residential building.

"The bodies of the victims, many of whom were policemen, were completely burnt by the blast," an interior ministry official said.

The US military said Iraqi police initially reported a toll of at least 40 Iraqi citizens killed and 25 wounded and that the truck was loaded with 500 pounds (220 kilograms) of explosives.

Bomb scare empties NY tube station

AP, New York

A bomb scare emptied Pennsylvania Station on Sunday and disrupted service on trains and city subways for about an hour.

The busy commuter hub was evacuated after someone threw a backpack at an Amtrak agent and said it was a bomb, said Marissa Baldeo, a spokeswoman for New York City Transit. The threat was a false alarm, and service on all lines was restored at about 1:25 pm (local time).

Sarah Swain, an Amtrak spokeswoman, said service was suspended because of police activity and declined to discuss details.

The incident came days after the latest bombing attack in London, which prompted New York police to start random inspections of subway riders' bags.

After evacuating Penn Station, police sealed the Eighth Avenue entrance with yellow tape and moved everyone across the avenue to the west side.

The incident was over as quickly as it began. One minute, camouflage-clad soldiers were shouting, "Penn Station is closed indefinitely," and the next minute they got the all clear and started letting people into the station.



Thousands of protesters march in Manila with an effigy demanding resignation of Philippines President Gloria Arroyo yesterday during her annual state of the nation address.

Impeachment motion filed against Arroyo

President proposes political overhaul

AFP, Manila

Embattled Philippine President Gloria Arroyo yesterday proposed overhauling her country's political system as she tried to face down a new impeachment motion and a mass protest calling for her to resign.

Fighting for survival over allegations she rigged last year's election, Arroyo used her State of the Nation address to outline sweeping changes that close allies have suggested could allow her to leave office with dignity.

As around 40,000 protesters took to the streets to demand her ouster, Arroyo was greeted with applause from her supporters in Congress as she suggested a plan to scrap the presidency, draft a new constitution and create a parliament.

"The system clearly needs fundamental change and the sooner the better," she said. "Our political system has now become a hindrance to our national progress."

Only indirectly referring to the crisis that has led a dozen cabinet members and top officials to quit, Arroyo appealed for national unity and said she wanted to press ahead with the economic reforms she

began last year.

"Now is not the time for divisiveness. While there is no avoiding partisan politics, there can be a determined effort by all sides to limit the collateral damage," she said.

The US-trained economist has been dogged by scandal for weeks after the release of audiotapes in which a woman sounding like her tells an alleged election official to fix her victory.

Arroyo has apologised for speaking to an election official before the votes had been counted but denied any wrongdoing, and she has repeatedly ignored the calls to step down.

Meanwhile a crowd that police estimated at 40,000 marched on the legislature, waving banners such as "Resign Gloria!" and burning her in effigy.

Security forces used shipping containers, fire engines and garbage trucks to block the path to the legislature and deployed around 6,000 riot police to handle what was the second large street demonstration against her this month.

According to a poll released on Sunday, 52 percent of Filipinos said Arroyo should resign -- but that call has not been joined by either the overwhelmingly Catholic country's influential bishops or the military.

UK Muslims feel they are 'under suspicion'

BBC ONLINE

Senior members of the UK's Muslim community have voiced fears the London bombing hunt is making innocent people feel they are under suspicion.

Labour peer Lord Ahmed said many Muslims in the north of England believed they could become victims of mistaken identity by armed police.

And Azad Ali, chairman of the Muslim Safety Forum, said many young Muslims were reluctant to leave their homes.

"They fear that they're all suspected bombers," he told BBC

Radio Five Live.

"We've received many emails, we've received telephone calls, about how young Muslims don't want to use the Tube now."

Police have called on the whole community to be vigilant when travelling on public transport and report anything they think to be suspicious.

But the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Ian Blair, has stressed no section of society should be singled out.

The shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian man police wrongly suspected of being a suicide bomber, has heightened fears

that innocent people could be caught up in the investigation.

Lord Ahmed said some sections of the Muslim community were afraid they could also become a victim of mistaken identity.

"I've been to Bradford, Birmingham and Sheffield during the weekend and people are very concerned," he said.

They fear they could, like Menezes, be victims of the shoot-to-kill policy or be mistakenly arrested as the police gather intelligence on the Muslim community.

Lord Ahmed also said it was possible illegal immigrants would run if challenged by the police.

Islamic leader clashes with Howard over terror

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister John Howard and an Islamic leader have traded accusations of inciting hatred as the country feverishly debates new anti-terrorist measures against London-style suicide attacks.

Melbourne-based cleric Sheikh Mohammed Omran said in an open letter to the prime minister published yesterday that Howard's remarks about the possibility of

suicide bombers living in Australia were "inflammatory".

Howard had criticised Omran for what he called "appalling" comments suggesting that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden "in effect is a good man and the attacks in London were the responsibility of the Americans".

There was an obligation on religious leaders "not to incite hatred, not to preach intolerance, and that is a responsibility Islamic leaders in Australia carry very

heavily," Howard said.

Omran, head of the fundamentalist Muslim group Ahlus Sunnah wal Jam'ah Association of Australia, hit back in his open letter by attacking the prime minister's comments after the London attacks in which he suggested that Australia could harbour suicide bombers.

"This statement does nothing but entice fear into the hearts of Australians. It is your statement which is inflammatory," he wrote.

Nervous bravado in European cities under al-Qaeda threat

AFP, Rome

In European cities on an al-Qaeda Internet hit list, people are showing a mixture of resignation, defiance and nerves.

"Sooner or later, it will be our turn," said Italian tourist Ilaria Rambelli who, like many others in the country, believe Italy, a steadfast US ally with 3,000 troops in Iraq, could be the next target of a terror attack.

"There was the United States, Madrid, London, and yesterday Egypt. We are even more under threat because our government is close to the Bush administration and Britain," she said outside a cafe a few streets from the Vatican and St. Peter's Square. Nearby, a 63-year-old pensioner, Paolo, said he had told his two children to ease off using the bus and subway trains.

"And when I look at the basilica of St. Paul's, I always think of the planes from September 11 with a sense of foreboding."

Most Britons believe bombings linked to Iraq war: Poll

AFP, London

The vast majority of Britons believe the London bombings are linked to Britain's involvement in the Iraq war, according to a survey to be published yesterday.

The YouGov survey for the Daily Mirror newspaper and GMTV found that 23 percent of 1,671 respondents thought the war was the main cause of the attacks, while another 62 percent thought it was a contributory factor.

Only 12 percent said they thought it was not a significant cause of the twin bomb attacks on the London mass transport system on July 7 and 21.

Fifty-six people including the four suicide bombers, believed to be Islamic extremists, died in the first attack but no one was injured in the second because the bombs failed to explode.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has dismissed suggestions that his support for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has made Britain a target for Muslim Jihadis willing to wage "holy war" against perceived enemies of Islam.

Asean takes step to set up rights body

AFP, Vientiane

Southeast Asian nations took the first step towards creating a regional human rights body yesterday with a "breakthrough" decision to consider establishing a commission on the rights of women and children, an official said.

"It's a happy day for human rights," said Marzuki Darusman, co-chairman of an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) human rights working group which met with Asean officials.

"It will mean addressing the needs and the problems of women and children, the most vulnerable groups in society," said Darusman, an Indonesian parliamentarian and former chairman of that country's rights commission.

"We're going to be engaged in looking into the setting up of commissions for women and children," Darusman told reporters after the meeting.

Asked whether the women's and children's commission would lead to a full regional human rights body, he said: "That would be our hope."

The region's highest-profile victim of rights abuses is Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest despite repeated pleas by regional leaders for her release.

While Darusman's working group held its meeting Monday, other regional officials gathered here were trying to find a last-minute face-saving way for military-ruled Myanmar to give up Asean's 2006 chairmanship, diplomats said.

Darusman said the working group intends to hold more frequent meetings with Asean officials and to step-up co-ordination with local rights commissions in the region to help promote their work.

Darusman called the developments "somewhat of a breakthrough".

Andaman residents consider move after latest tsunami scare

AFP, Port Blair

After yet another huge earthquake and a tsunami scare overnight, some residents of the battered Andaman and Nicobar Islands say they have had enough and are planning to move.

"Every major quake makes me worried, and my ageing parents are thinking about migrating to Chennai," on the Indian mainland, said student Prem Kumar. "They can't take it any more."

His parents are not the only ones -- some among the hundreds of mainlanders who have arrived here in the past few years to work in the service and tourist industries have been packing to leave again, officials said.

It was late Sunday on the remote Andaman and Nicobar Islands when an earthquake, which the US Geological Survey said measured 7.0 on the Richter scale, shattered the tranquillity of residents.



Villagers rest on a pavement after evacuating to higher ground in Phuket early yesterday amidst tsunami warning due to a major earthquake in India's Nicobar Islands. Thai authorities said they were pleased with their tsunami warning system that sounded an alarm following a major earthquake in the Nicobar islands in the Indian Ocean.

Hundreds of children starving in Niger

AP, MARADI, Niger

Nasseiba Ali is the face of hunger in Niger. The 20-month-old girl weighs just 12 pounds, and her eyes are clouded at night, one of the symptoms of her chronic malnourishment.

Nasseiba may survive because her grandmother was able to get her to a feeding centre. But aid groups despair that so many other children are dying because the world was slow to respond.

"I thought we would not make it safely," Nasseiba's grandmother, Haoua Adamou, said in Hausa through an interpreter after walking several hours with the baby on her back to the emergency feeding centre at Maradi, some 400 miles east of the capital, Niamey.

She sat Saturday fanning flies from Nasseiba's face.

The aid agency Oxfam warned last week that about 3.6 million people, about a third of them children, face starvation in this West African nation devastated by locusts and drought.