

US SAYS

Differences remain with India on nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

The United States said yesterday differences remained on a landmark nuclear deal to supply India with crucial technology as a top US official left New Delhi after talks aimed at breaking the logjam.

US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns departed early Saturday after talks in the capital with Indian officials ended without a breakthrough on the deal to provide India with advanced civilian nuclear technology.

"There are differences remaining," US embassy spokesman David Kennedy said. "But the US

hopes they can close them (the differences) before President Bush visits India" next Wednesday, he added.

New Delhi and Washington have been seeking to seal the nuclear deal before George W. Bush's three-day visit.

Bush also said there was work to be done to hammer out the agreement in an interview released late Friday.

"I understand the politics were going to be difficult and there's still work to be done," Bush told India's state-run broadcaster Doordarshan.

"We've just got to continue to come up with an agreement that both of us can live with."

The pact had been billed as the highlight of Bush's three-day trip to India, starting March 1. But the two nations have been at odds over how to ensure that India's military facilities do not benefit from nuclear technology transfers.

"It's also very important for India to understand our concerns about making sure that ... a civilian program is separate from the military," Bush said.

India said progress had been made in talks in New Delhi.

"The two sides had detailed and productive discussions. There was greater clarity on the issues under discussion. Progress has been

made in the talks," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement late Friday.

Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reached preliminary agreement on the deal in July 2005.

Under the accord, fuel-starved India would get access to civilian nuclear technology to develop its energy sector it has been denied since conducting nuclear tests and refusing to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Even if US and Indian negotiators iron out their differences, the agreement still needs the approval of the US Congress and the 44-member Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Museveni wins Uganda polls

AFP, Kampala

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni won the country's first multi-party polls since 1980, according to official results released yesterday giving him an insurmountable lead over opposition challenger Kizza Besigye.

The Electoral Commission said Museveni had taken 60.8 percent of Thursday's vote to Besigye's 36 percent with 9.1 percent of polling stations reporting, making his bid to extend a 20-year hold on power an unannounced certainty.

The commission did not declare a winner but the results ended Besigye's last hope of forcing a run-off -- required if no candidate takes more than 50 percent -- mathematically impossible.

Final results were due later Saturday.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L), Home Minister Shivraj Patil (C), and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Chief Minister Gulam Nabi Azad (R) during a meeting with political leaders and intellectuals in New Delhi yesterday. Singh began a day of round-table talks with Indian Kashmiri politicians on the future of the disputed region as separatist leaders boycotted the meeting.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepali parties announce fresh protests to put pressure on king

AFP, New Delhi

Nepal's opposition parties announced yesterday a new round of nationwide protests to restore democracy, piling fresh pressure on King Gyanendra who seized power a year ago.

The announcement of the protest programme was a riposte to King Gyanendra's olive branch to the political parties last weekend in which he asked them to take part in talks and push forward "the stalled democratic process."

"The seven-party alliance's Joint Movement Taskforce Committee has decided to launch nationwide protests against autocracy," Rajendra Prasad Pandey, a leading member of the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist Leninist), said.

Pandey told AFP the new protest campaign would begin on Wednesday and would be capped by nationwide demonstrations on March 11.

The campaign was a sign of worsening relations between the king and the parties, said Rabindra Kanal, political science professor at Tribhuvan University.



PHOTO: AFP

Shipping containers are used as makeshift roadblock by members of the presidential guards who are standing on alert as security remains tight around the presidential palace in Manila yesterday. This comes after President Gloria Arroyo declared a state of emergency over an alleged coup plot by military men in connivance with civilian backers and leftist figures.

Arroyo cracks down on opposition, media

AFP, Manila

Philippine police arrested an opposition congressman and a retired general and raided a newspaper office yesterday after President Gloria Arroyo launched emergency measures to foil an alleged coup plot.

Congressman Crispin Beltran, a leader of the leftist Bayan Muna (Nation First) coalition, and retired general Ramon Montano, who has publicly backed the removal of Arroyo, were arrested separately, police said.

"They are part of a conspiracy to commit rebellion," Director-General Arturo Lombao, head of the national police, told a news conference.

Arroyo declared a national emergency Friday to quell an alleged conspiracy by military officers and civilian allies coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the February 25, 1986 fall of dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

Demonstrations linked to the anniversary of the "People Power" revolt, which the opposition is using to demand Arroyo's resignation, have been banned.

A Catholic mass was the only public event marking the day, attended by former presidents

Fidel Ramos and Corazon Aquino, who are both estranged from Arroyo.

Streets in the capital appeared calm Saturday and there were reports the military may stand down from a maximum-alert status but Arroyo opponents have accused her of trying to bring the country back to the Marcos martial-law era.

Three officers from elite security units led by US-trained special forces officer Brigadier General Danilo Lim were relieved of their commands before dawn Friday and placed under investigation.

At least eight other persons were being sought in connection with the alleged conspiracy involving a "withdrawal of support" by military officers to signal the start of a mutiny to force Arroyo to step down.

Police raided the offices of the Daily Tribune, a small newspaper highly critical of Arroyo, early Saturday, confiscating papers and documents.

Daily Tribune editor and publisher Ninez Cacho-Olivares said she would try to bring out the Sunday edition of the paper. "I'll be damned if I let them take it over," she said.

India begins Kashmir peace conference

Separatists boycott meet

REUTERS, AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh kicked off a peace conference yesterday with pro-India parties and minority Hindu groups in Kashmir, but the talks are seen as being undermined by a boycott by separatists.

The one-day talks have been clouded by the killing of four boys between 8 years and 18 years this week in what police said was a gunbattle between suspected militants and soldiers.

But villagers blamed the military and an official probe has been ordered. The deaths in north Kashmir have sparked widespread protests in the Muslim-dominated Kashmir Valley in the region, cause of two of three India-Pakistan wars.

Kashmiri separatists had earlier rejected Singh's invitation to the conference, saying he should have released political detainees and reduced the number of soldiers in the restive region before talks to build confidence.

The killings have fuelled more

anger.

"Human rights violations and peace cannot go together," senior separatist leader Maulana Abbas Ansari told Reuters.

A strike called by the breakaway faction of Kashmir's main political separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), entered its second day and shops and businesses were shut in Srinagar.

The APHC is not attending the conference.

Anger has also been fuelled after a woman was killed in an army operation against militants on Thursday but security officials said it was an accident and regretted her death.

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Gulam Nabi Azad is attending the conference.

Members of the minority Hindu Pandit community were also are expected to press for a separate enclave for their community within the state's current boundaries.

Overnight, in continuing violence in mainly Hindu India's only Muslim-majority state of Jammu

and Kashmir, soldiers killed three militants in the southern Doda district.

A strike called by separatist parties in revolt-hit Kashmir to protest the alleged army killing of four civilians paralysed much of the region for a second day yesterday, witnesses said.

Shops, businesses and banks were closed in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, where Islamic rebels have been fighting New Delhi's rule since 1989. Similar shutdowns were reported across the majority-Muslim state.

The two-day strike was called by Kashmir's separatist alliance, Hurriyat.

The army said the four civilians - aged between nine and 20 -- died in crossfire between rebels and soldiers in Didipora village in Kupwara district.

But residents said the victims were playing cricket and were shot after one tried to flee on seeing approaching soldiers.

US reaffirms support for Abbas, snubs Hamas

AFP, Ramallah

The US Middle East envoy yesterday reiterated US support for Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and his policies but did not extend that to an eventual government led by Hamas.

Speaking after talks with Abbas, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch said: "We had a chance to discuss all the issues and the relationship between the United States and President Abbas.

Welch did not answer, instead turning to go to his car.

But afterwards, senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said Abbas had told the envoy that the United States "must respect the democratic choice of the Palestinians."

Abbas also "spoke about the latest escalation and asked Welch to seek US government to put pressure on Israel to stop."

Erakat said Welch had reaffirmed US commitment to helping

meet the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people.

Welch's trip comes amid a spike in Israeli-Palestinian violence, which has seen nearly a dozen Palestinians killed this week. Abbas has already called for a meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the situation.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan expressed "grave concern" Friday about the escalation in operations by the Israeli army and a marked increase in rocket attacks by Palestinian militants.

Saturday's talks came amid signs that the US government is open to giving Hamas time to moderate its fiercely anti-Israeli stance. President George W. Bush has warned there could be an aid cut-off if Hamas does not do so.

Thai PM defends snap polls, critics urge vote boycott

AFP, Bangkok

Embattled Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra defended his decision yesterday to dissolve parliament and call snap elections in a bid to end Thailand's political turmoil and return with a new electoral mandate.

The premier also said the prolonged political standoff was damaging the economy, as Thailand was set to launch a major public works project it hoped would drive foreign investment in the kingdom.

"In capitalism, a country's confidence should not be damaged," he told the nation in his weekly radio address, urging voters to turn out for the polls on April 2 to elect a new government.

"The government must be decisive and return the power to the people to decide whether they still want this administration or now," he said, vowing not to surrender to "mob rule".

"It doesn't matter if you're fed up with me, but you have just one vote like everyone else. So I urge all

voters to turn out for this historic election to cast your vote," he said.

Amid mounting pressure to quit, Thaksin late Friday dissolved the lower house of parliament, forcing a new vote three years ahead of schedule, that closely follows his landslide election victory in 2005.

Analysts see the move as countering demands that he resign, with Thaksin likely to ride his current popularity to a fresh mandate.

Later in the day, Thaksin, the head of the ruling Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party, attended its meeting to discuss details for the upcoming elections. He refused to talk to reporters following the meeting.

Thailand's biggest opposition Democrat Party was also holding a meeting on Saturday. No details were available about the meeting.

The anti-Thaksin movement gained momentum over his family's 1.9 billion dollar tax-free sale of stocks in Shin Corp - the telecoms giant he founded before entering politics -- to foreign investors in January.



Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (C) flanked by his Thai Rak Thai party members arrives to hold a meeting at party's headquarter in Bangkok yesterday. Thaksin, the most powerful elected leader in Thai history, appears to have again shaken off a career-ending threat, countering calls for his resignation with a snap polls.

PHOTO: AFP

al-Qaeda threatens to hit more Saudi sites

AP, Manama

al-Qaeda suicide bombers will attack more Saudi oil facilities, the terror group purportedly threatened yesterday in an Internet statement that claimed responsibility for the foiled attack on the Abqaiq plant in eastern Saudi Arabia.

Two suicide bombers tried to drive cars packed with explosives into Abqaiq, the world's largest oil processing facility, on Friday afternoon, but security guards opened fire and the vehicles exploded outside the gates, killing the bombers and fatally wounding two guards.

The guards died in the hospital, the Interior Ministry said Saturday in a statement published on the Web site of the official Saudi Press Agency.

Saudi Oil Minister Ali Naimi quickly said the attack "did not affect operations" and that exports continued to flow. But the blast made the price of crude oil jump by more than \$2 a barrel on the world markets.