

Bush renews Myanmar sanctions

AFP, yuma, Arizona

US President George W. Bush on Thursday renewed economic sanctions on Myanmar for another year, saying military rulers of the Southeast Asian nation posed a threat to US national security and foreign policy.

Myanmar's military junta has been accused of serious human rights abuses, such as jailing the country's opposition leaders, particularly democracy icon and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Their latest crackdown on ethnic minorities, targeting mainly the Karens, has been condemned by rights groups, who say it is the most serious offensive since 1997.

"Because the actions and policies of the government of Burma (Myanmar) continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States, the national emergency ... and the measures adopted ... with that emergency must continue in effect beyond May 20, 2006," Bush said in a statement.

The US sanctions date to May 1997 and were stiffened by Bush in July 2003.

They prohibit new investments and exports of financial services to and imports from Myanmar. The United States has also frozen Myanmar junta members' assets in the United States and has broadened denial of visas to regime officials.

India promises more university seats to quell anti-quota stir

AFP, New Delhi

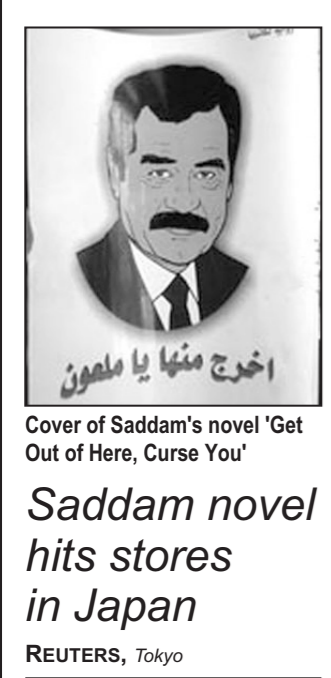
Indian officials promised more university places for all yesterday as a medical strike against a new affirmative action plan entered its second week with fresh clashes between police and students.

A week after police beat medical students with batons in the western city of Mumbai, television stations broadcast images of khaki-clad officers whacking crouching students in white coats in the eastern state of Bihar Friday.

Unlike the students in Mumbai, the Bihar students were for more places for the disadvantaged students.

As many as 35 were injured in the clashes, including 20 protesters and four journalists, reports said. Violence started when police turned on the students after they vandalized cars and accused local media of failing to cover the rally.

But anti-quota protesters continued to demand the government scrap plans to reserve more places for the disadvantaged in top universities, even as Indian officials said they will hike the total number of university places.



COVER OF SADDAM'S NOVEL 'GET OUT OF HERE, CURSE YOU'

Saddam novel hits stores in Japan

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japanese readers looking for a slightly different tale can now curl up with "Get Out of Here, Curse You" -- a novel by former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

The book, believed to have been written on the eve of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and titled "Devil's Dance" in its Japanese translation, hit stores around the nation on Friday.

Jordan banned the book on the grounds it could damage ties with Iraq, but pirated copies of the tale of an Arab tribesman who defeats foreign invaders became a bestseller in Amman.

The original manuscript was smuggled out of Iraq by one of Saddam Hussein's daughters, Raghad, and a copy given to Japanese journalist and translator Tsuko Hirata.

"The novel is dated to the times of ancient tribal society but the tribal warfare depicted in the novel is strikingly similar to what happened and is happening in the Iraqi war -- totally," Hirata told Reuters before the book's release.

"He (Saddam) knew he was heading into a war he couldn't win, so I think with this book he was trying to make his position clear and send a message to the Iraqi people."

US groups warn against 'dangerous' military aid to Nepal army

AFP, Washington

The United States said Thursday it was ready to resume military aid to Nepal more than a year after cutting supplies of lethal weaponry to the Himalayan kingdom but rights groups cautioned against what they see as a premature and dangerous move.

Washington "stands ready to provide assistance to security forces if requested by the new government," Richard Boucher, the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, told a Congressional hearing.

Boucher said he made the offer to Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala during a visit to Kathmandu earlier this month after mass protests forced Nepal King Gyanendra to restore democracy.

"This offer includes a commitment to continue training programmes that improve the human rights record of Nepali security forces," he said.

Nepal has one of the highest

numbers of political disappearances, blamed on the military, rights groups say. They also say torture is widespread.

Sam Zarifi, research director of the Asia division at US group Human Rights Watch, told the hearing that Washington should not rush into resuming military aid.

"The United States should not resume transfer of lethal military material to the (military) until and unless a legitimate civilian Nepali government requests the aid and until the (military) demonstrates that it is a disciplined, accountable force," he said.

John Norris, the Washington head of the International Crisis Group think tank, warned that any resumption of military aid that did not meet basic criteria "would be seen as dangerous and provocative measures" by Maoist rebels as well as mainstream politicians in Nepal.

Washington suspended lethal military aid after King Gyanendra sacked the government and took direct control of the country in February last year.

The ruler climbed down and handed back power to the political parties earlier this month after weeks of often violent anti-royal protests organised by seven sidelined political parties in loose alliance with Maoist rebels.

Nepal's parliament voted unanimously Thursday for drastic curbs on the powers of King Gyanendra, including taking away his control of the army.

Curtailling the king's powers is part of the new administration's efforts to persuade Maoist rebels to uphold a ceasefire declared after the king gave up power and to take part in peace talks.

The Maoists' 10-year revolt has left 12,500 dead.

Boucher said Thursday the United States hoped that the Maoists' commitments to peace and multi-party democracy was genuine.

"However, based on their track record, they have not earned the benefit of the doubt," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera (L) listens to his Japanese counterpart Taro Aso (R) at the start of their talks at the foreign ministry's Ikura guest house in Tokyo yesterday. Samaraweera called earlier on donor countries to raise pressure on the Tamil Tigers to resume talks and curb the rebels' fund-raising overseas.

Top UN envoy meets Myanmar opposition

AFP, Yangon

A top United Nations envoy tasked with pressing military-run Myanmar on reforms met members of detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party yesterday amid fresh US pressure on the junta.

Ibrahim Gambari, UN under-secretary general for political affairs, arrived in Yangon Thursday for a three-day visit, marking the highest-level mission by the global body for more than two years.

He has asked to see 60-year-old Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of the National League for Democracy (NLD), who has spent more than 10 of the last 17 years under house arrest.

But NLD spokesman Myint Thein said the party did not believe the military would approve a meeting between Gambari and Aung San Suu Kyi, whose house arrest is expected to be extended next week.

Instead, the junta brought seven members of the NLD's central executive committee to a meeting

with the UN envoy later Friday. Myint Thein said the meeting took place but had no further details.

Asda Juyanama, a former Thai ambassador to the United Nations, said he was skeptical whether Myanmar would allow Gambari to see Aung San Suu Kyi.

"If they don't let him see her, it is a signal to the world that this regime does not want to talk to anybody" except China, India and Thailand, Myanmar's neighbours with close political and economic contacts with the junta, he said.

"They are afraid of her because if she goes out, there will be a large following," the former UN ambassador said.

The junta crushed pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988 and two years later rejected the result of national elections won by the NLD.

Gambari's mission came as US President George W. Bush on Thursday renewed economic sanctions on Myanmar for another year, saying its military rulers posed a threat to US national security and foreign policy.

Iran promises cooperation with UN inspectors

AFP, Vienna/ Tehran

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani promised that Tehran would cooperate with UN inspectors, in a meeting late Thursday in Vienna with UN atomic agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei.

"The discussion was that of course Iran is continuing its cooperation with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and that inspectors will continue their work in accordance with the NPT (nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) comprehensive safeguards," Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, told AFP Friday.

Iran is honouring its NPT safeguards obligations, which mandate the IAEA to verify that nuclear material is not being diverted from peaceful uses.

But it has cut off wider inspections, such as visits to sites not directly linked to the presence of nuclear material.

It did this after the IAEA in February referred Tehran to the UN Security Council due to concern

over Iran's nuclear programme, which the United States charges is a cover for secret development of atomic weapons.

IAEA officials have said this severely limits their ability to monitor nuclear activities in Iran.

Larjani's visit came as the European Union is readying a package of trade, technology and security benefits in return for Iran guaranteeing that its nuclear programme is peaceful.

The EU and the United States want the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran if the Islamic republic rejects this package, which the five permanent Security Council nations plus Germany are to finalise at a meeting next Wednesday in London.

Iran has already rejected what is expected to be yet another call on it to stop uranium enrichment, the process that can produce either fuel for nuclear power reactors or the explosive core of atom bombs.

The Security Council had on March 29 asked Iran to honour IAEA calls for the Islamic Republic to

suspend its enrichment work and also to cooperate fully with an over-three-year-old IAEA investigation which is still unable to determine whether the Iranian nuclear programme is peaceful or weapons-related.

IAEA spokesman Marc Vidricaire said Larjani and ElBaradei had "talks about the usual things, issues that are still unanswered and of course the requirements of the (IAEA) board (of governors) to provide some confidence-building matters."

"The purpose of the meeting was really to discuss the remaining unanswered questions regarding Iran's past (nuclear) programme and the request by the board for confidence-building measures," Vidricaire said.

He did not provide details.

Earlier Iranian state television denied reports that Tehran had used Chinese uranium gas to accelerate enrichment for its controversial nuclear programme, insisting the gas was homemade.

Pakistan ridicules UK, Afghan charges of sheltering Taliban

AFP, Kandahar/ Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday angrily rejected allegations by Afghan President Hamid Karzai and a top British army officer that it was letting Taliban militants infiltrate Afghanistan to carry out attacks.

Karzai blamed Pakistan on Thursday after two days of bloody clashes in his country left around 100 people dead, including scores of militants, 13 policemen and a female Canadian soldier.

"There is no truth in this," Pakistani foreign office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam told AFP. "Pakistan is not providing training to insurgents and it is not sending them to Afghanistan."

Ten people were killed in fresh fighting in Afghanistan as security forces carried out clean-up operations after some of the heaviest clashes in months left more than 100 people dead, most of them Taliban.

"Eight Taliban were killed and

two police were also killed in the fighting on Thursday night," Ghazni governor Sher Alam Ibrahim said.

He said one militant was also captured during the battle while nine policemen were wounded.

The fighting was some of the most violent in Afghanistan since the headline Islamic Taliban regime was toppled in a US-led invasion in 2001 for sheltering al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Karzai also claimed that hardliners in Pakistani Islamic schools known as madrasas were sending students for jihad (holy war) in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's military later rubbished a "ludicrous" claim by Colonel Chris Vernon, chief of staff for British forces in southern Afghanistan, that Taliban militants were launching attacks in Afghanistan from its side of the border.

4 US troops killed as Iraqis wrangle on forming govt

REUTERS, Baghdad

A roadside bomb near Baghdad killed four US soldiers on Thursday and Iraq's leaders fought last-minute battles for jobs in a much delayed national unity government before a parliament vote scheduled for Saturday.

An Iraqi interpreter also died in the blast northwest of the capital in the type of violence Washington hopes a grand coalition of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds will start to tackle after five months of stalemate.

Prime Minister-designate Nuri al-Maliki is juggling with a host of names put forward by the various political parties for the posts already broadly allocated to them, negotiators said.

Factional fighting within Maliki's own Shia Alliance bloc and others was complicating the task of appointing ministers to be confirmed in Saturday's expected parliamentary vote.



PHOTO: AFP

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (L) meets with Chinese President Hu Jintao in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Annan met with Hu on the first day of his China visit with North Korea, Iran and East Asian tensions on the agenda.

Clashes erupt as Hamas deploys gunmen in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Two Palestinian policemen were wounded early yesterday in the first clashes since Hamas deployed gunmen in the Gaza Strip, amid US warnings that rival paramilitaries are creating a dangerous situation.

Thousands of security forces, dominated by the once ruling Fatah, and gunmen loyal to the now governing Hamas deployed in strength for a second day running amid spiralling concerns about Palestinian civil unrest.

A Hamas gunman was also wounded.

The auxiliary force -- created without the consent of Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas, overall commander-in-chief of security -- comes under the direct command of Hamas interior minister Said Siam and is closely linked to the

Islamists' armed branch, the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades.

Two Fatah loyalist policemen were lightly injured and a member of the new Hamas auxiliary security force more seriously hurt when tensions spilled over into overnight gunbattles in Gaza City.

"A suspicious car opened fire on policemen then on the new (Hamas) armed force, provoking clashes between the two sides," said interior ministry spokesman Khaled Abu Hilal after medical sources reported the injuries.

Fatah spokesman Tawfiq Abu Khussa levelled full blame at the Qassam Brigades for sparking the clashes, accusing Hamas of stirring up trouble and theft.

"A national security car was stolen and used against police. It was definitely the work of a black militia (Hamas's Qassam Brigades)

which wants to create tensions. It has nothing to do with protecting security," he told AFP.

Police said members of the new force opened fire on the police headquarters in Gaza City, while witnesses reported other gunbattles elsewhere in Gaza City overnight that broke up without causing any casualties.

On Friday, traditionally a Muslim day of rest and prayer for Palestinians, hundreds of security officers and Hamas militiamen were out in force -- in parts of Gaza City displaying an even greater show of strength than on Thursday.

Gunmen from the new unit patrolled the major intersections, short distances away from armed preventative security officers in downtown Gaza and outside the Shatti refugee camp, an AFP reporter said.

Israel, US at odds on nuclear treaty draft

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the United States are at odds over a draft US international treaty that would ban the production of plutonium or enriched uranium for use in nuclear weapons, a newspaper reported yesterday.

Israel made a last-minute effort to dissuade the United States from submitting for discussion the draft, which was on Thursday presented to the UN disarmament commission in Geneva, the liberal Haaretz daily said.

The Jewish state -- widely believed to be the only nuclear power in the Middle East -- is worried about any move that could undercut its policy of nuclear ambiguity and generate future pressures on its activities.

Haaretz also said Washington rejected an Israeli request to purchase previously denied civilian nuclear technology, similar to an agreement with India, which like Israel has not signed the nuclear

Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Israeli officials questioned by AFP refused to make any comment on the front-page Haaretz article.

The United States Thursday submitted the draft treaty to the Geneva disarmament conference on an international ban on producing fissile material such as uranium and plutonium for military purposes.

It was the first occasion that Washington had submitted a disarmament proposal since the end of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s.

The US draft does not cover stocks of fissile material and thus does not propose banning use of fissile material produced before the proposed treaty eventually enters into force.

Even if the draft is adopted, the treaty would not be able to halt Iran's alleged quest to acquire nuclear weapons since Tehran is adamant that it is enriching uranium solely for civilian purposes.

Annan in China with N Korea, Iran on agenda

AFP, Beijing

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was due to meet Chinese President Hu Jintao on the first day of his visit here yesterday, with North Korea, Iran and East Asian tensions expected to be on the agenda.

Annan flew in from Tokyo to begin the third leg of his five-nation Asian tour, in which he has already spoken out on the global stand-offs over the Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues.

China, which has veto power on the UN Security Council, has been a key player on both issues, and Annan's visit was expected to be closely watched by the international community.

In Japan on Thursday, Annan said better diplomacy was needed from all sides in helping to resolve the two nuclear disputes, and warned the world was moving mindlessly towards a situation where all nations wanted nuclear weapons.