

Abe govt wants summits with China, South Korea

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's new government said yesterday it wanted to hold summits as soon as possible with China and South Korea to repair sour ties.

Chinese and South Korean leaders refused to meet previous prime minister Junichiro Koizumi due to his repeated visits to a war shrine linked to Japan's imperialist past.

"We want to hold summit meet-

ings as soon as possible between Japan and China and between Japan and South Korea and have these bilateral relationships serve as a cornerstone of stability in East Asia," said Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki.

"I believe the time is getting ripe in each country to improve Japan-China relations and Japan-South Korea relations," Shiozaki, the top spokesman for Abe's government, told a news conference.

"Therefore, it is important to

make mutual efforts between Japan and China, and between Japan and South Korea," he said.

Abe, who took office Tuesday, is known for nationalist views and has strongly backed Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni war shrine, which honors war dead and war criminals alike.

But Abe has refused to say if he would continue to visit the shrine as prime minister and has called for better relations with neighboring countries.

His conciliatory remarks were cautiously reciprocated by the neighboring countries.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao promised "relentless efforts" to improve ties. South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun called for "future-oriented" relations with Japan.

Japanese officials have said they hope Abe can meet Roh and Chinese President Hu Jintao on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific meeting in Vietnam in November.

Rewriting pacifist constitution on top of Abe agenda

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has put rewriting the US-imposed pacifist constitution at the top of his agenda, a move that could lead to a more active military role overseas but alarm neighboring countries.

Abe, who took office Tuesday as Japan's first prime minister born after World War II, has been vague on much of his platform but has passionately vowed to revise the constitution, saying he wanted to "write it with my own hand."

"I belong to the post-World War II generation. The era dominated by the preconceived idea that the constitution should never be changed is over," Abe said during the campaign.

But experts said the process of rewriting the constitution would likely be slow and methodical as Abe seeks to win over skeptics both at home and abroad.

Abe himself turned more cautious as it became certain he could succeed Junichiro Koizumi as prime minister.

In a debate with his rivals Abe said it would take five years to revise the

constitution -- meaning he would need a second term if he wants to see through the reforms as premier.

"I think he is being discreet and careful because he is serious about this issue," said Jun Iio, professor of politics at the National Graduate Institute For Policy Studies.

The constitution, which was drafted by US occupiers after militarist Japan's surrender, barred the country forever from maintaining a military or even threatening to use force.

Despite its pacifism and US guarantees to protect Japan, the country now has around 240,000 troops on active duty and an annual military budget of 4.81 trillion yen (41.6 billion dollars).

A draft new constitution supported by Koizumi would preserve Japan's official pacifism but acknowledge it has a military -- not the "Self-Defense Forces" as it is now known.

Polls show overwhelming public support for revising the constitution, with the main opposition party also in favor, but mixed views on how far to deviate from Japan's official pacifism.

Tokyo must 'squarely address' its historical legacy, demands Seoul

AFP, Seoul

South Korea will resume summits with Japan if the new administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe "squarely addresses" that country's historical legacy, Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon said.

In the transcript of an interview released yesterday by Seoul's foreign ministry, he made it clear the key to better relations was how Japan treated its 20th century militaristic past.

"We sincerely hope that Prime Minister Abe will learn lessons from what has transpired from Prime Minister (Junichiro) Koizumi's administration," he said.

"That means he should squarely address the past history legacy issue, and then we are prepared to have all sorts of high level exchanges and meetings including summit meetings," he told Japan's Kyodo news.

The interview was conducted Tuesday in New York as Abe was formally voted into office by parliament.

Koizumi had infuriated Japan's former colony South Korea and other Asian neighbours by repeatedly visiting Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, which honours war criminals

among the war dead.

Ban welcomed the reappointment of Foreign Minister Taro Aso. "We will closely cooperate to see the improvement of our bilateral relationship but the Japanese leadership should look at this correct history legacy," he said.

President Roh Moo-Hyun, who refused to meet Koizumi because of the shrine visits, separately congratulated Abe on his inauguration.

"I wish relations between South Korea and Japan will develop in a future-oriented way and regional cooperation in Northeast Asia will be further enhanced," he said in a telegram Tuesday evening.

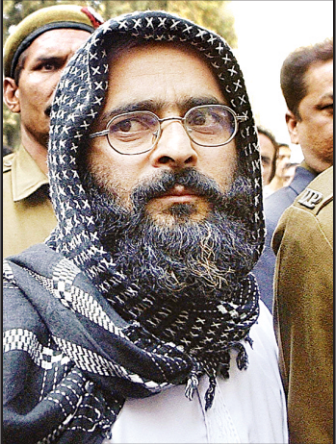
Ties have also been strained over a disputed group of islands, called Dokdo in South Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

Analysts in Seoul quoted by the Yonhap news agency noted the presence of conservatives in key posts in Abe's first cabinet reflected his move to adopt tough policies on North Korea and revive patriotism in Japanese schools.

Yasuhisa Shiozaki, who was vice foreign minister, was named to the influential post of chief cabinet secretary.



PHOTO: AFP
Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi international airport opens today. About 100 airlines will operate out of the airport, which has an initial capacity of 45 million passengers a year, far larger than the decades-old Don Muang international airport.



Terror Afzal to be hanged at Tihar prison next month

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A court here has set October 20 as the date for execution of a man belonging to militant outfit Jaish-e-Mohammed who was convicted of plotting the 2001 terror attack on Indian Parliament.

Mohd Afzal will be hanged at 6.00AM on October 20 in the maximum-security Tihar jail here, a trial court ordered on Tuesday.

Afzal was sentenced to death by the trial court on December 18, 2002, a year after the attack on Parliament, for plotting the strike. The Supreme Court had last year confirmed the death sentence.

After the court fixed the date for Afzal's hanging, his lawyers said they have not yet received any instruction from him or his family members to move a mercy petition before the Indian President.

The trial court had in December 2002 sentenced to death Afzal to death, along with Delhi University college lecturer S A R Gilani and Shaukat Hussain Guru for the terror attack on Parliament.

The court had also sentenced Shaukat's wife Afsan Guru to five years' rigorous imprisonment for concealing knowledge of the conspiracy. However, the Delhi High Court later acquitted Gilani and Afsan Guru.

Afzal will be the first convict to be hanged in Tihar jail in seven years. The last executions were those of Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh, assassins of then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in 1989.

The attack on Parliament had left 14 people, including security personnel and five militants, dead and brought India and Pakistan close to a war.

Iraq war 'cause celebre' for terror: US report

AFP, Washington

The Iraq war is a "cause celebre" swelling the ranks of Islamist terrorists, who are likely to grow in numbers for the next five years, according to US intelligence findings declassified on Tuesday.

The grim findings in the National Intelligence Estimate, made public at US President George W. Bush's request, cast doubt on the White House's politically potent premise that the United States is winning the global war on terrorism.

The NIE, which represented the consensus of the 16 US spy agencies in April, said the US-led campaign triggered by the September 11, 2001 attacks had "seriously damaged" Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network.

But it warned that the number of self-declared "jihadists" globally was "increasing both in number and geographic dispersion" making extremists "harder to find and undermine" and that this could mean "increasing attacks worldwide."

In perhaps its bleakest assessment, the report found that "the underlying factors fueling the spread of the movement outweigh

its vulnerabilities and are likely to do so for the duration of this estimate," five years.

It also found that Bush, who maintains that the war in Iraq has made the United States safer, was warned by intelligence agencies in April that the conflict was acting as a de-facto recruiting sergeant for terrorist groups.

"The Iraq conflict has become the 'cause celebre' for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement," the report said.

While it did not lend support to Bush's strategy in Iraq, the report lent credence to his contention that victory there could be a significant blow in the "war on terrorism."

"Perceived jihadist success there would inspire more fighters to continue the struggle elsewhere," it said, but "should jihadists leaving Iraq perceive themselves and be perceived to have failed, we judge fewer fighters will be inspired to carry on the fight."

It also lent strong support to the embattled president's contention that spreading democracy in the Muslim world could be a powerful

antidote to the social ills that he says fuel terrorism.

"Greater pluralism and more responsive political systems in Muslim majority nations would alleviate some of the grievances jihadists exploit," it said.

"Nonetheless, attendant reforms and potentially destabilizing transitions will create new opportunities for jihadists to exploit," it warned.

Bush ordered parts of the "key judgments" of the assessment made public after weekend media reports cited US officials as saying that it concluded that the Iraq war had made global terrorism worse.

Bush blasted those reports as stemming from politically motivated leaks, while opposition Democrats rushed to embrace them as ammunition ahead of November 7 elections that will decide control of the US Congress and shape the president's last two years in office.

Key US anti-terror ally Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf further rolled the debate Tuesday by saying on CNN that he believed the conflict "has made the world a more dangerous place."

Revealing the missing details of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa

AFP, Ottawa

Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" originally wore a delicate maternity garment, her hair gathered up in a bun, details that have disappeared under varnish but are now visible under 3D imaging, scientists said Tuesday.

Researchers of the National Research Council of Canada (NRC) announced their findings of the first 3D images of the masterpiece, using a complex laser scanner, at a news conference in Ottawa.

"This is the 'Mona Lisa' as we have never seen her before," said NRC president Pierre Colombe.

A team of NRC researchers had traveled to Paris in October 2004 to conduct the research on probably the Louvre Museum's most viewed painting, at the request of the French state museum agency Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musees de France (CRRMF).

The 3D scans revealed that the woman with the enigmatic smile was originally painted with her hair tied back in a bun, even though today it appears loose on her shoulders.

The revelation settles an old

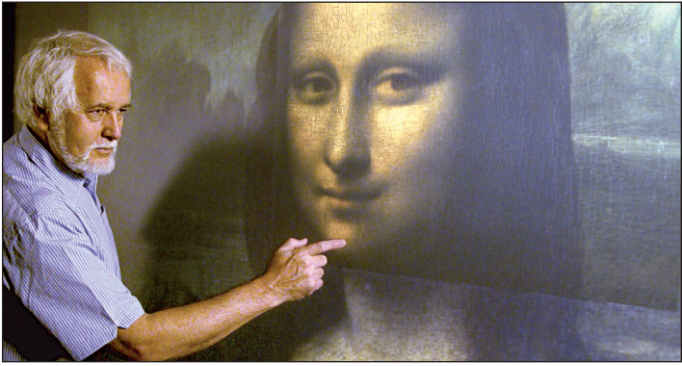


PHOTO: AFP

National Research Council of Canada (NRC) scientist Marc Rioux examining the virtual 3-D model of "Mona Lisa" using a multi-resolution display system.

controversy because only girls or women of bad virtue wore their hair loose in 16th century Italy, said CRRMF project leader Bruno Mottin, and the real Mona Lisa was a woman of social stature.

One of her garments, similar to fashions that pregnant or nursing women wore in this period, was also lost under yellow varnish and no longer visible to the naked eye, infrared scans showed.

"This is something that had never been seen until now," Mottin said.

Israeli military court orders release of top Hamas official

AFP, Ramallah

An Israeli judge yesterday ordered the release of Palestinian deputy prime minister Nassereddine al-Shaer, who was detained as part of a crackdown on the Hamas movement, his lawyer said.

The military judge ordered Shaer to be freed because of "lack of evidence" and no charges were brought against him, his attorney, Osama al-Saadi, told AFP.

Shaer is the most senior Hamas official to be released since Israel arrested scores of members of the headline movement after its armed wing claimed joint responsibility for the capture of a soldier near the Gaza Strip in late June.

Saadi said the 44-year-old Shaer, who was held in jail in Petah Tikva near Israel's commercial capital Tel Aviv after his arrest in August, was expected to reach home in the northern West Bank town of Nablus within a few hours.

"He is already en route to Nablus," Saadi said. There was no immediate confirmation from the Israeli military on the minister's release.

LABOUR'S ANNUAL CONGRESS

Blair's speech marks end of an era

AFP, Manchester

Tony Blair's last speech as leader to Labour's annual congress here on Tuesday brings to an end 12 years in which he turned around the fortunes of the once unfashionable left-wing party.

After years of self-destructive ideological infighting, Blair turned Labour from a union-dominated dinosaur into a sleek, forward-thinking centre-left machine, with a blend of corporate-friendly social and economic policies.

Eyebrows were raised when Blair, then 41, was elected Labour leader following the untimely death of John Smith in 1994.

But he was Labour's unquestioned hero in 1997, when his revamped "New Labour" won a landslide general election victory, unseating the Conservative Party after 18 years in power and making him prime minister.

But in the nine years since, he has courted controversy -- particularly over Iraq -- and this month even risked being bundled unceremoniously out of Downing Street by his own party, much like Margaret Thatcher before him.

All that seemed forgotten as he took his bow Tuesday in an hour-long



Tony Blair

speech to the party faithful that was peppered with warm applause, a standing ovation as he took the stage, another as he left and even an encore with wife Cherie.

The ticket-only affair saw the 12,000 delegates with tickets wait in line for up to an hour beforehand while others huddled around television screens in the main exhibition space at Manchester's G-Mex arena.

In a nod to the title of Labour's 1997 election song -- D:Ream's "Things Can Only Get Better" -- one supporter held aloft a placard proclaiming: "Tony, You Made Britain Better." Another said: "Too Young to

Retire".

In 1997, the charismatic, guitar-playing Blair seemed refreshingly in touch, whether by hanging out with Britpop bands or capturing the public grief for Diana, Princess of Wales, by calling her "the people's princess".

But a succession of foreign wars, especially the deeply unpopular foray into Iraq, plus what some have seen as his party's cynical manipulation of the news agenda and scandals involving officials and ministers, changed all that.

Where once the youthful, smiling Anthony Charles Lynton Blair was seen as an asset to woo those tired of politics, women and younger voters, certain Labour members increasingly saw the gaunt and greying premier as a liability.

A row with supporters of his likely successor, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, erupted earlier this month, forcing Blair into saying he will resign as both Labour leader and prime minister in the next 12 months.

Blair was sanguine about the difficulties Tuesday.

"Ten years after, government has taken its toll. It's in the nature of the beast," he said.

But Blair, whom Brown on Monday called "the most successful

ever Labour leader and prime minister", is assured his place in the pantheon of British politics.

He became the first Labour leader to secure three, straight terms of office by winning the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections.

On domestic policy, he oversaw some of the most wide-ranging changes in the British constitutional make-up for centuries when Scotland and Wales voted to have their own devolved administrations.

Although the groundwork was laid by his Tory predecessor John Major, Blair signed the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland, ending for the most part decades of violence between Catholics and Protestants there.

Other key moments include the introduction of the Human Rights Act, partial reform of the unelected upper chamber of parliament the House of Lords and greater legal recognition for same-sex couples.

Under Blair's government, Britain's central bank, the Bank of England, was given the power to set interest rates and the minimum wage was introduced.

