

# World alarmed as N Korea threatens nuclear test

AFP, London

World leaders reacted with alarm yesterday as news that North Korea plans to carry out a nuclear test, warning it could have serious consequences for the impoverished hermit nation.

"A missile test launch would be viewed by the United Kingdom and the rest of the international community as a highly provocative act with serious consequences for the DPRK," said a spokesman for the British Foreign Office.

"It would raise tensions in an already tense region," he added.

Pyongyang said Tuesday that it intended to carry out a test of nuclear weapons in response to threats and sanctions from the United States which it said was trying to topple the communist nation.

"The US extreme threat of a nuclear war and sanctions and pressure compel the DPRK (North Korea) to conduct a nuclear test, an essential process for bolstering

nuclear deterrent, as a corresponding measure," it said.

The statement, issued by the foreign ministry, gave no time or date for the test, which if carried out would be the first anywhere in the world since 1998.

Japan was first to respond to the announcement, with Foreign Minister Taro Aso denouncing the idea as unforgivable.

"It would be a threat to peace. We would never be able to forgive such a move," Aso told reporters. "It would gravely affect Northeast Asia, including Japan."

Aso said he did not doubt North Korea's resolve in testing a nuclear device.

"In the past, the country has done what it had said earlier. So I think it would be wrong automatically to think the country will not do this."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also urged North Korea to be cautious, calling on the US to engage in one-on-one negotiations with North Korea to resolve interna-

tional concerns over Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

Together with other countries involved in six-party talks with North Korea, "we are working with Pyongyang in order that it exercises restraint and in order to prevent hasty steps" by North Korea, Lavrov told journalists.

But the Russian minister cast doubt on Pyongyang's seriousness, saying: "It is not the first time that we've heard this kind of announcement, but for the most part these announcements have not been confirmed."

The current standoff over North Korea's nuclear programme erupted in 2002 when the United States accused Pyongyang of running a secret uranium enrichment programme in violation of a 1994 denuclearisation agreement.

But tensions between the US administration of President George W. Bush and Pyongyang have risen since North Korea test-launched seven missiles in July, heightening speculation that a nuclear weapons

test was in the works.

The South Korean presidential Blue House had no immediate comment, as Tuesday is a public holiday marking National Foundation Day.

The Seoul government has for years adopted a "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North, but suspended regular aid shipments after the missile tests.

And a British expert on Japan and northeast Asia security, John Swenson-Wright, warned Tuesday's threat should not be underestimated, but said it could be part of a delicate diplomatic game of brinkmanship.

"It's very serious because of the implications for the region and for the Bush administration proliferation policy," the expert with the Chatham House international affairs think-tank in London told AFP.

"I would be surprised if they went ahead and tested. It exposes them to a great deal of risk, far more than the missile launch.

## Israeli jets fly over Lebanon despite troop pullout

REUTERS, Marjayoun

Israeli warplanes flew over Lebanon yesterday two days after Israeli forces withdrew from virtually all of south Lebanon, witnesses said.

At least two jets flew in from Israel at medium altitude and headed north toward central Lebanon, the witnesses said.

Israeli forces pulled out from south Lebanon on Sunday except from the small village in line with a UN truce that ended a war between Israel and Hezbollah guerrillas.

Lebanon says overflights violate Lebanese sovereignty and breach a UN resolution that halted the fighting on August 14.

Israeli government spokeswoman Miri Eisin told Reuters in Jerusalem that the overflights would continue to help ensure that arms supplies do not reach Hezbollah from Syria.

"Israel's redeployment along the international border does not negate Israel's right to self-defence and to assist in the implementation of the arms embargo, especially when it comes to the Syria-Lebanese border, an issue that has not yet been resolved as part of the Security Council resolution," she said.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) and former South African president and anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela (C) arrive at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg Monday. The leaders of South Africa and India renewed their commitment on Monday to push for expansion of the United Nations Security Council to include more developing nations from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

## Gunman kills 5 US girls at Amish school

REUTERS, Nickel Mines

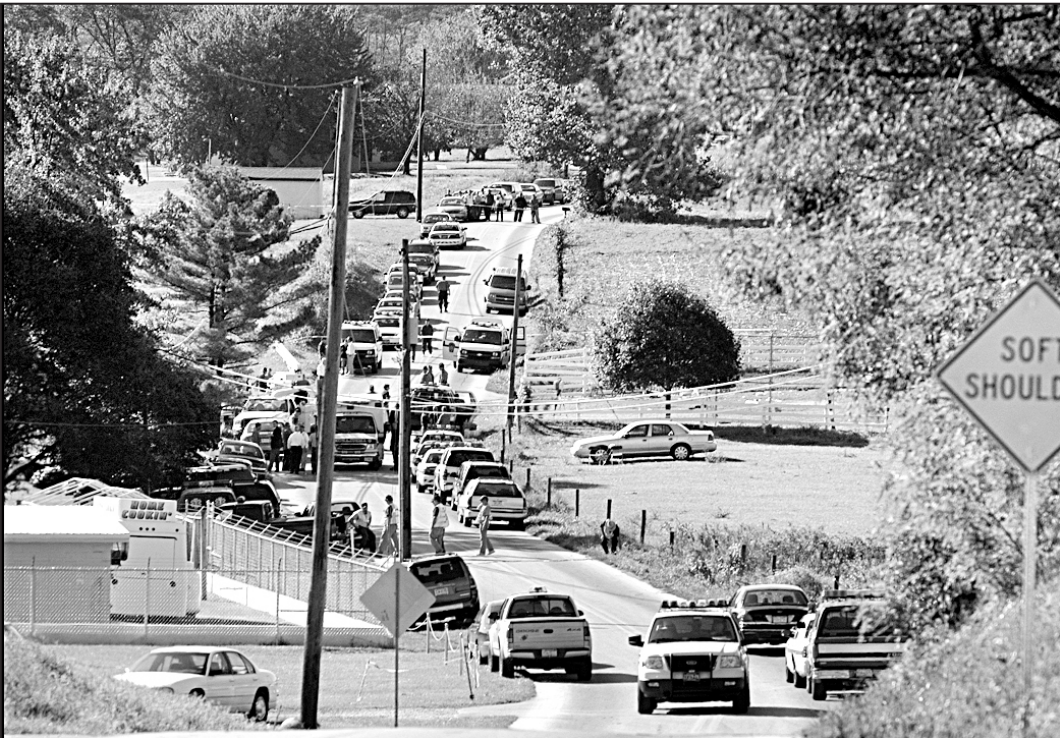
A dairy truck driver with a grudge burst into a one-room Amish schoolhouse on Monday and killed five girls execution style before committing suicide in the third deadly US school shooting in the past week, authorities said.

Eight other girls were wounded and CNN reported that one of them died several hours after the assault.

The heavily armed gunman, identified by authorities as Charles Carl Roberts, 32, had ordered the boys and some adults out of the classroom before opening fire on the girls.

Roberts, who was not Amish, had dropped his own three school-aged children at their bus stop in the morning, showing no sign of the rampage to come, Commissioner Jeffrey Miller of Pennsylvania state police said at a news conference.

But Roberts had left a rambling suicide note and letter to his wife and children, referring to an event 20 years ago for which he sought revenge, and he planned for a lengthy siege.



Police and emergency vehicles are seen parked at the scene of a shooting at a one room Amish schoolhouse Monday in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. A man entered the school, let the boys go free, tied up the girls and shot them execution style. At least five girls are dead and seven are injured. The gunman shot and killed himself.

## Russia slaps sanctions on Georgia

AFP, Moscow

A wave of sanctions by Russia against its southern neighbour Georgia came into effect yesterday in the wake of a spy scandal that has brought relations between the two ex-Soviet states to a new low.

Russia announced Monday sweeping punitive economic measures against Georgia, including a halt to all air, sea, rail and road transport, as well as postal deliveries and money transfers made through the Russian postal system.

The sanctions were expected to have an immediate and painful effect on Russia's southern neighbour, and came in spite of Tbilisi's release of four Russian officers it had detained on spying charges last week.

The arrests sparked a diplomatic crisis, with President Vladimir Putin labelling them "state terrorism".

# Tigers agree to peace talks in Oslo

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers told Norway's special peace envoy yesterday they are prepared to meet the government for crunch peace talks in Oslo in late October, a source close to the negotiations told Reuters, in a move welcomed as "positive" by the government.

If President Mahinda Rajapakse agrees to the dates and venue, the talks will come after months of deadlock and weeks of the worst violence since a 2002 ceasefire in which hundreds of people have been killed and tens of thousands displaced.

"The Tigers have agreed to go to Oslo for talks on Oct. 28-30," the source said on condition of anonymity after envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer met the Tigers' political wing leadership in the northern rebel stronghold of Kilinochchi.

The Sri Lankan government has

told peace mediator Norway it would be prepared to hold talks either on Oct 30 or on Nov 10 due to parliamentary commitments.

"This is positive news," said one senior government official, asking not to be named, saying President Mahinda Rajapakse would still need to give the final approval on the Tiger dates.

"We need to work out some of the details," he added.

The government and the rebels have repeatedly said they are ready to resume talks after a five-month impasse. But sporadic fighting continues — the air force bombed rebel territory in the north on Tuesday after the Tigers fired artillery at army positions — and Nordic truce monitors see little will from either side to halt the violence.

Some analysts fear talks might be premature given the upsurge in fighting, the worst since a 2002 truce.

Emboldened by the capture of strategic rebel territory south of the northeast harbour of Trincomalee, some military officials say they are keen to inflict as many casualties on the Tigers as possible before talks.

The Tigers have warned the tattered truce will collapse completely if military attacks on their territory continue.

Analysts suspect shadowy Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is buying time. They say he's ready for his political wing to talk with the government to give his forces the chance to regroup after fierce aerial bombing, artillery and rocket fire by the security forces.

Prabhakaran's annual Heroes' Day address in November is approaching, and after two consecutive years threatening to resume the Tigers' freedom struggle for a separate homeland, is seen under pressure.

# Iran offers French nuclear role amid sanctions threat

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday suggested France should lead a consortium to produce enriched uranium on Iranian soil, in a new attempt to ward off the threat of sanctions over its nuclear ambitions.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, who has been leading talks aimed at persuading Iran to suspend the sensitive nuclear activity, described such French monitoring as "interesting" but in need of further examination.

The proposal comes after a new warning from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Iran would automatically be hauled before the UN Security Council for possible sanctions if it does not suspend enrichment.

"The best solution to dispel the worries about Iran's nuclear activities is not to demand a suspension" of enrichment, the deputy head of Iran's atomic energy organisation, Mohammad Saeedi, told AFP.

"We have an idea that technically and legally is the best solution."

"It is that France creates a consortium with Eurodif and Areva to

carry out enrichment in Iran and thus they can closely monitor our nuclear programme," he added, referring to France's enrichment specialist and its parent company.

Iran's use of uranium enrichment, a process used to create the fuel for a nuclear power station but which can also provide the explosive core of a nuclear bomb, lies at the centre of the standoff.

Tehran has so far refused to comply with Western demands to suspend uranium enrichment as proof it is not seeking nuclear weapons, despite ongoing talks with the European Union aimed at making it halt the practice.

Tehran insists its nuclear programme is solely for peaceful energy needs, vehemently rejecting US allegations it is seeking to manufacture nuclear weapons.

"The Iranian proposal for French monitoring of uranium is interesting," Solana told reporters in Finland, adding the suggestion "needs analysis".

"We have discussed since the very beginning the possibility of a control," he said. "We discussed it lightly before, it may be an idea that can be dis-

cussed now more in detail."

The French foreign ministry however reacted coolly, describing the proposal as "unexpected" and saying it was still awaiting a response from Iran in its talks with Solana on whether to suspend enrichment.

Solana and Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Ali Larjani, spoke on the telephone Monday and resolved to make further contact in the next days. The conversation was the first contact between the two men since they held talks in Berlin last week.

The intense activity on both sides came as the head of Russia's security council Igor Ivanov arrived in Tehran and went into talks with Larjani, Iranian media said.

Russia has supported calls for Iran to suspend nuclear enrichment, but has been reluctant to endorse sanctions and wants to continue work on building a nuclear power station at Bushehr, in southern Iran.

# Rice urges Hamas to recognise Israel

AFP, Riyadh

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called yesterday for the Hamas-led Palestinian government to recognise Israel, saying at the start of a regional tour that innocent Palestinians were being hurt by factional fighting.

Asked at a media conference in the Saudi city of Jeddah what to do about violent clashes between the ruling Islamist Hamas movement and its rival Fatah, Rice said "the answer is for the Palestinians to find a government that can be committed to the Quartet principles."

"Innocent Palestinians are caught in this violence. I call on all parties to stop this violence," Rice said alongside her Saudi counterpart Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal.

Ten Palestinians have been killed and over 100 wounded in two days of clashes in the West Bank and Gaza.

The so-called Quartet grouping of the United States, European Union, Russia and United Nations backs the Middle East roadmap for peace, which calls on the Palestinians to renounce violence, recognise Israel and agree to abide by past peace

agreements for the aid to resume.

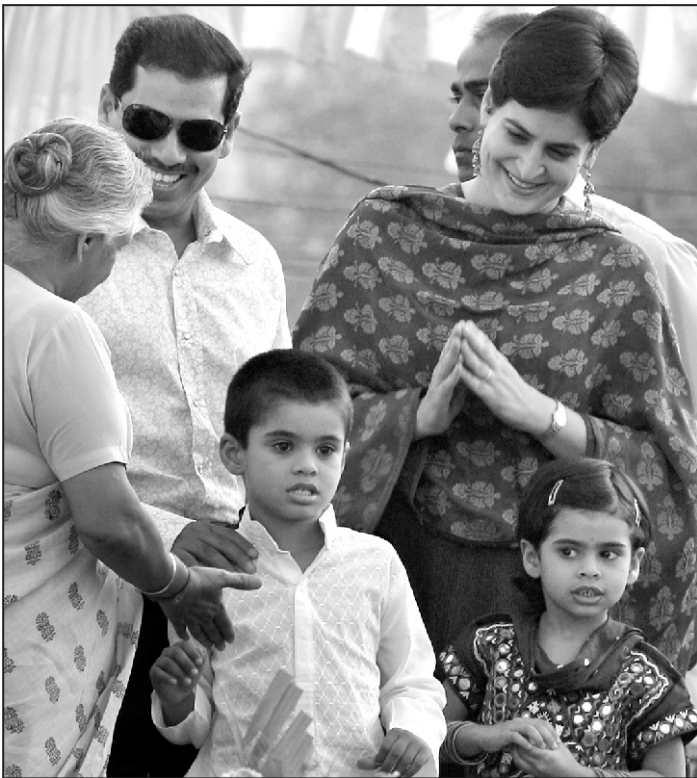
In exchange, the roadmap calls for a Palestinian state to exist in peace and security alongside Israel, which must in turn end illegal settlement activity in the occupied West Bank.

Hamas has so far refused to recognise Israel or previous agreements signed with Israel by the formerly ruling Fatah. Israel continues to build settlements on Palestinian land.

"The Palestinians need to have a government that can serve their needs," Rice said.

The worst violence in the territories since Hamas formed a government in late March erupted after Hamas tried to prevent Fatah loyalist protesting over non-payment of salaries, which they have not received since Hamas came to power.

The European Union and the United States, which along with Israel consider Hamas a terrorist organisation, cut all direct aid to the Palestinian government after the Islamists formed a government.



United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Chairperson and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi's daughter Priyanka Vadhera (R), her Husband Robert and children meet with Delhi's Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit (L), ahead of the burning of the effigy of the Hindu demon Ravana, stuffed with fire-crackers, at a function marking the Hindu festival of Dusehra in New Delhi Monday.

## 'Violence driving 9,000 Iraqis from homes every week'

AFP, Geneva

The number of Iraqis fleeing their homes to escape sectarian strife is rising dramatically, and has now reached almost 9,000 per week, the International Organisation for Migration said yesterday.

Spiralling violence between Iraq's Shiite and Sunni Muslim communities since February has pushed the number of internal refugees in central and southern Iraq to around 190,000, IOM spokeswoman Jemini Pandya told journalists.

The IOM said it is working with the Iraqi authorities to take stock of the problem.

"The displacement is increasingly looking like permanent settlement and there is urgent need for shelter and employment solutions for these families," said Pandya.

According to Rafiq Tschannen, the IOM's head of mission in Iraq, host communities are taking in the displaced, who are usually from the same religious community.

## South Korea's FM on course to replace Annan

REUTERS, United Nations

South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon said on Tuesday he bore "a heavy sense of responsibility" after an informal ballot that virtually assured he would become the next United Nations secretary-general.

Ban, 62, will probably be named formally on October 9 in an official vote by the 15-nation UN Security Council after winning four straw polls, including a crucial one on Monday.

After the council's recommendation, the 192-member UN General Assembly is expected to endorse Ban as the eighth secretary-general of the United Nations since 1946 to replace Kofi Annan of Ghana, who ends 10 years in office on December 31.

"It is quite clear from today's vote that Minister Ban Ki Moon is the candidate the Security Council will recommend" to the General Assembly, China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, told reporters.



South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon (L) is congratulated by his office staff at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul yesterday. South Korea was jubilant after its Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon took a decisive step towards becoming the next United Nations secretary general.

## Two US soldiers, 10 Taliban killed in Afghan clash

REUTERS, AFP, Kabul/ Khost

Two US and four Afghan soldiers and 10 Taliban fighters were killed in separate clashes in the eastern Afghan province of Kunar and Khost, the US-led coalition force said yesterday.

Three US soldiers were also wounded in the fighting late on Monday in the province's Pech district.

Taliban insurgents attacked a border police post in southeastern Afghanistan, sparking a gunbattle, which left three policemen and 10 rebels dead, a provincial governor said.

A group of militants tried to storm the checkpoint in the Gomal district of unruly Paktika province late Monday and fled after an hour-long battle, governor Mohammed Akram Khepeltwak told AFP on Tuesday.

"Three border police were martyred and 10 Taliban were killed in the one-hour fighting in Gomal district," he said.

Three police officers were also wounded in the incident, he added.

# 'Myanmar to crackdown on Indian rebels'

AFP, Guwahati

Myanmar is poised to launch fresh military operations aimed at evicting Indian separatists from its northern areas, a rebel leader said yesterday.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland, fighting for an independent tribal homeland in the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland, said thousands of Myanmar soldiers were moving into areas used by separatists to hide out.

"The Myanmarese army is setting up bunkers and moving military hardware close to our bases and we expect an assault by them within a week or so," Kughalo Mulatonu told AFP by telephone.

The senior rebel leader said approximately 3,500 soldiers were being moved to Myanmar's northern Sagaing Division, where the separatist group has at least 50 camps with some 7,000 guerrilla fighters entrenched in fortified bunkers.

He also alleged that India was providing military aid to Myanmar's military junta ahead of the expected

crackdown.

"We are ready to give the Myanmarese military a real taste of our fighting skills," Mulatonu said.

No official confirmation of the claims was immediately available.

Two weeks ago India urged Myanmar, with which it shares a 1,640-km unfenced border, to intensify operations against anti-India separatist rebels and curb the smuggling of drugs and arms.

Myanmar has repeatedly assured New Delhi that it would not let Indian rebels operate from its soil. The last crackdown on Indian rebel camps was in February.

India says there are about 30 insurgent groups active in its northeast, of which at least 12 operate out of Myanmar's northern regions.

More than 50,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in the northeast since India's independence in 1947.

Myanmar's oppressive military government is cracking down hard on political dissent in a bid to crush any public support for possible UN

action against the junta, analysts say.

In the past week, the authorities have arrested six pro-democracy activists, going to their homes, ordering them to pack a few personal belongings, and then marching them off without a word on their fate to family or colleagues.

The arrests came in the same week that Myanmar was discussed at the United Nations Security Council, with the United States vowing to introduce a draft resolution on human rights abuses in the country formerly known as Burma.

"The military is well aware of the impact that a UN resolution can have, so basically it seems the military prioritises internal security ahead of international punishment," Myanmar analyst Aung Naing Oo told AFP.