

Abe goes to China Sunday, South Korea the next day

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's new premier Shinzo Abe achieved a diplomatic breakthrough yesterday as China and South Korea agreed to resume summits, but a crisis over North Korea's nuclear programme was set to overshadow his trip.

Abe will go to Beijing on Sunday and to Seoul the following day in his first foreign trip as premier. In contrast his predecessor Junichiro Koizumi visited the United States, Japan's closest ally, first.

Beijing had refused to invite a Japanese prime minister for five years, in part due to an emotionally-charged dispute over Koizumi's visits to a Tokyo war shrine seen as symbolizing Japan's past militarism.

Both Beijing and Tokyo suggested that they had reached a deal on the controversial issue.

Abe, who took office on September 26, is scheduled to meet with President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao in Beijing and then hold a summit with South Korean President



Shinzo Abe

Roh Moo-hyun in Seoul, officials in the three countries said.

But the diplomatic opening, which Koizumi's government had sought in vain for years, was overshadowed by North Korea's announcement Tuesday that it would conduct its first nuclear test.

North Korea's neighbors all urged restraint amid a flurry of diplomacy, with Roh due to go to China on October 13.

But Abe has long been known as a hardliner on the communist state, whereas Beijing and Seoul prefer a more flexible approach.

Officials sounded conciliatory as they announced Abe's tour but kept mum on details.

China said the visit was made possible after "overcoming the political obstacle to bilateral relations."

It did not elaborate, but China in the past used "political obstacle" to refer to Koizumi's visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine.

Koizumi as premier went six times to the shrine honoring war dead and war criminals alike, infuriating China and the two Koreans which remain bitter over past Japanese aggression.

Abe is known for his nationalist views and has visited the shrine in the past. He has refused to say if he will visit as prime minister, while hinting he will go in secret.

Japanese officials refused to say if Abe's reticent stance on the shrine led to the diplomatic breakthrough.

Koizumi went to the shrine with television cameras rolling, most recently on August 15, the emotive anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender, which Koreans celebrate as "Liberation Day."

Asked if Abe would discuss the Yasukuni shrine dispute with his counterparts, government spokesman Yasuhisa Shiozaki: "It's common sense that this will probably be a major topic."

"But Japan and China agreed in promoting a healthy bilateral relationship, overcoming political difficulties," said Shiozaki, the chief cabinet secretary, without elaborating.

However, the bridge-building visit could show up disagreements on North Korea.

Abe built his career as a hawk on the communist state. He told parliament he would seek cooperation with China and South Korea, which have taken a more conciliatory stance towards Pyongyang.

Two killed in militant attack in Srinagar

AFP, Srinagar

Two police commandos were killed and seven people hurt when Islamic rebels opened fire from a hotel window in Indian Kashmir's summer capital yesterday, sending shoppers fleeing in panic, police said.

Security forces rushed to the scene as the firing erupted from the window of the small hotel near Lal Chowk, the major shopping area in Srinagar.

Police initially thought only one militant was involved but later said they believed there were two militants.

Security forces said the gunmen appeared to be targeting a nearby police paramilitary camp.

Two police commandos were killed and three policemen and four civilians were wounded in the attack, which was still continuing late Wednesday.

A group known as Al-Mansurian claimed responsibility in calls to local media.

Israel should accept Saudi peace plan

Israeli minister says

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli cabinet minister from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima party said yesterday that the Jewish state should accept a Saudi peace initiative to solve the conflict with the Palestinians.

"We should take the bull by the horns and, when I say that, I mean we should accept the moderate (Arab) countries' initiative, the Saudi initiative," Justice and Housing Minister Meir Sheetrit told public radio.

He said Israel would be willing to withdraw from Arab territory occupied ever since the 1967 Middle East war, as stipulated in the Saudi blueprint, in exchange for a "complete peace".

"If we are talking about overall peace, if we want overall peace, we are compelled to accept all the elements of the initiative and withdraw to the 1967 borders," the minister added.

"Israel should set the agenda on the Palestinian question... and tell the Saudis, come and talk about your initiative," Sheetrit said.

"We should invite (Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas) Abu Mazen for face to face talks," he said, emphasising Israel was "ready to make significant compromises to draw its permanent borders".

All-women UN peacekeeping unit for Liberia

AFP, New Delhi

The United Nations and India have agreed on the deployment of 125 Indian policewomen as peacekeepers in Liberia, the first time the world body has used an all-female unit, officials said yesterday.

"A memorandum of understanding between the UN and India has now been signed in New York and our unit will leave for Liberia later this month," Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) spokesman Abhisekh Dayal told AFP.

The officers, aged between 25 and 30, are to be deployed for a possible six-month tour of duty in the Liberian capital Monrovia, which is emerging from years of savage civil war.

"Our girls are now fully-trained in everything -- language and communication skills, martial arts, weaponry, rescue and full-scale combat," said Poonam Gupta, a senior officer with the CRPF.

Pakistan must 'walk the talk' on anti-terror vow

Manmohan warns after police accused ISI of plotting Mumbai blasts

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan has to prove it is sincere about working with India to counter terrorism, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh warned after police accused Islamabad of plotting blasts that killed 186 commuters in India's financial capital Mumbai.

"Pakistan will have to walk the talk," to back up its promise to cooperate on terrorism, Singh told reporters Tuesday night.

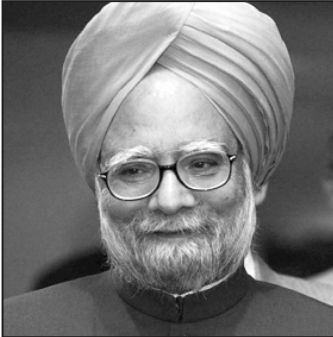
"Whatever has been discovered (by Mumbai police), we shall share that information with Pakistan and test them on how sincere they are in carrying forward the commitment I and President (Pervez) Musharraf have underlined," Singh said on his plane trip home from South Africa.

Mumbai police chief A.N. Roy on Saturday publicly accused Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), of orchestrating the July attacks on trains that also wounded 800.

Pakistan has pledged to take action if India produces evidence to show that ISI was involved in the Mumbai bombings, but has denied any role in the attacks.

India froze peace talks with Pakistan in the aftermath of the attacks but agreed to continue the dialogue after a meeting between Singh and Musharraf in Havana on September 16.

The leaders decided to "put in place an India-Pakistan anti-terrorism institutional mechanism to identify and implement counter-terrorism initiatives and investiga-



Manmohan Singh

tions."

When asked how the proposed counter-terrorism mechanism would work, Singh said: "We have set up this mechanism. How else can we ask for information except through a mechanism like this?"

"The mechanism is yet to take off," he said.

But once it does, "then we will test the waters," Singh said. He added that the peace process cannot "move forward until both countries sincerely work to gain mastery over this menace."

India's National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan echoed Singh's warning.

"If Pakistan is willing to help us out with this and says, 'Okay that they (militants) are located in Islamabad or Karachi', the mechanism can operate."

"But if every time if it (Pakistan) comes back to us and says, 'It is not true', then of course it means they are not willing to cooperate," Narayanan

Lankan peace bid runs into new snags

AFP, Colombo

Norway's latest attempt to secure agreement between Sri Lanka's warring parties has run into new snags with differences over the date and venue for talks, diplomats said yesterday.

Oslo's special envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer returned from meetings with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) without agreeing on a date to end the seven-month deadlock in negotiations, diplomats said.

They said the Tigers wanted the talks towards the end of the month in Oslo, as suggested by peace broker Norway, but the Sri Lankan government preferred different dates and a different venue in Switzerland.

"No one expected this process to be easy," a diplomatic source close to the peace process said. "Hanssen-Bauer will be meeting with Sri Lankan politicians today as well before he leaves tomorrow."

Even as Hanssen-Bauer was in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi on Tuesday talking with Tiger leaders, Sri Lankan war planes bombed nearby areas where the Tigers were said to have artillery guns.

The military said three artillery gun positions of the LTTE were attacked after a de facto front line came under heavy guerrilla artillery attack.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi residents look at the site of a bombing in southern Baghdad where a series of blasts near the convoy of Iraq's industry minister killed 12 people yesterday.

ENRICHMENT OF URANIUM

Tehran goes back on offer for French role

AFP, Tehran

Iran went back yesterday on its offer to allow France to monitor the enrichment of uranium on Iranian soil, saying the matter had yet to be decided.

"No decision has been taken for the moment on how to form a consortium and the parties which will be invited to participate," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad-Ali Hosseini said in a statement.

The deputy head of Iran's atomic energy organisation, Mohammad Saeedi, proposed on Tuesday that France create a consortium to enrich uranium in Iran, to allay international concerns over the nature of Iran's nuclear program.

The United States, France and Britain rejected the proposal as a stalling tactic and said it did not meet United Nations Security Council's demands that Iran freeze all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities.

Another report says Iran will not accept "any" suspension of uranium

enrichment. Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, the deputy to top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, said yesterday.

"We will not accept any climbdown, we will not accept any suspension," Rahmani Fazli told the Fars news agency in an interview.

"The suspension of one month or two weeks that has been demanded by the Western powers will not solve anything."

Iran yesterday was facing a barrage of Western warnings as time has almost run out to clinch a deal over its nuclear programme and it could be hauled up before the UN Security Council within a week.

Western powers have reacted coolly to a proposal by the Islamic republic that France monitor the enrichment of uranium on Iranian soil as a way out of the impasse, with the United States dismissing the suggestion as "stalling".

Efforts to find a solution remain blocked by the question of uranium enrichment, a sensitive nuclear activity world powers want Tehran to suspend as proof it is not seeking

nuclear weapons.

Iran insists it will not halt its programme.

"I hope that there is still room to resolve this," said US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is on a tour of the Middle East.

"But the international community is running out of time because soon its own credibility in terms of enforcing its own resolutions will be ... a matter of question," said Rice.

Officials in Washington and London suggested the momentum was now moving towards the issue being taken to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions within a week.

A high-ranking British official, who declined to be named, said preparations were now underway to propose a draft resolution at the UN Security Council under Article 41 of the UN Charter, which allows for economic sanctions.

Indians take centre stage at Frankfurt book fair

AFP, Frankfurt

The world's biggest book fair got underway yesterday with Indian authors taking on center stage and a new scheme to protect writers' copyrights from Internet piracy creating a buzz.

The 58th Frankfurt Book Fair brings together publishers from more than 100 countries for wheeling and dealing, and has spotlighted India this year as its guest country with a packed program of readings and debates.

More than 70 authors from the world's largest democracy have arrived in the German financial capital for a broad cultural showcase that will also feature dance, drama, films and even live yoga demonstrations.

Mahasweta Devi, an 80-year-old grande dame of Indian literature, said the fair would have to struggle to capture the endless contradictions and breathtaking pace of change in her country.

"India has learned to survive, to

adapt, to keep the old with the modern, to walk hand in hand with the new millennium whistling a tune from the dawn of time," she told a gala opening ceremony late Tuesday.

"Culture is what will take us into the future yet keep us in close contact with our roots, our history, our tradition, our heritage."

Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri and Kiran Desai -- shortlisted this year for the Man Booker prize -- are among the Indian writers who will present their work at the event with more than 7,000 exhibitors and some 280,000 visitors expected before the fair closes Sunday.

Zadie Smith, Donna Leon, Ken Follett and German Nobel laureate Gunter Grass, fresh from a scandal over his late revelation that he served in the Nazis' feared Waffen SS force during World War II, are among other writers who will be walking the vast halls in Frankfurt.



PHOTO: AFP

A publisher's associate fills books into shelves of the world's biggest book fair in the German town of Frankfurt Main yesterday.

AFP, Yala

Thailand's new military leaders said yesterday they may hold talks with Muslim insurgents in the violence-torn south, marking a change from the policy of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

"There are signals from insurgent groups and local people that they are ready to cooperate for the sake of peace in the region," Lieutenant General Viroach Buacharon, the new southern army commander, told reporters.

"But I have to wait for a clear sign from the government as to whether there will be negotiations or not," he added.

The September 19 overthrow of Thaksin sparked hope in the Muslim-majority south that an insurgency in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat could be quelled.

The three provinces bordering Malaysia have been plagued by separatist violence and unrest since January 2004, and Thaksin's decision to impose emergency rule there in 2005 was widely criticized as inflaming the situation.

Coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, Thailand's first Muslim army chief, was tasked by

Thaksin with solving the southern violence, and had gone against the government line by suggesting talks with the insurgents.

General Surayud Chulanont, who was appointed interim premier at the weekend, confirmed on Wednesday that Sonthi would be retaining his role in the south.

"Sonthi will continue to oversee security in the south in his capacity as chairman of the Council of National Security," said Surayud, referring to the name the military junta now goes by.

Surayud, who has vowed to put the southern unrest problem at the top of his agenda, said that his government may consider negotiations with leaders of the insurgency, but urged caution.

"It's too soon to say anything on this issue, we have to wait," he said. "There is no contact yet... I have to consult with others on this matter."

Nearly 1,500 people have been killed since the unrest erupted in January 2004. The violence has been blamed variously on ethnic Malay separatism, religious extremism, local police corruption and smuggling rings.

US urges Thai rulers to lift martial law in 10 days

AFP, Bangkok

The United States yesterday urged Thailand's military coup leaders to lift martial law within seven to 10 days and to bring forward elections the generals have promised for late next year.

"A year seems like a very long time," said a US embassy official in Bangkok, speaking on condition of anonymity. The diplomat added that "if martial law is not lifted in a week to 10 days, that would be a problem."

The junta that ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra on September 19 installed retired General Surayud Chulanont last weekend as interim prime minister until polls they have promised for October 2007.

The generals had initially pledged to make way for a civilian government, but their new constitution maintains military influence over the new premier, and restrictions on political activity and the media remain in place.

The White House had called Tuesday for "a quick return" to democracy in Thailand and warned its new military leaders that Washington was weighing action beyond US sanctions imposed last week.