



PHOTO: AFP

(L-R, saluting) Indian Defence Minister AK Antony, Chief of Army JJ Singh, Chief of the Naval Staff Arun Prakash and Indian Air Force Chief SP Tyagi salute as they pay homage to Indian soldiers who fought in the 1971 war against Pakistan at the Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate in New Delhi yesterday. The Indian army celebrates the Vijay Divas (Victory Day) every year on Dec 16 to mark the victory over Pakistan in the Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971.

India's top scientists oppose US N-deal

AFP, New Delhi

India's top nuclear scientists have repeated their fears that a landmark nuclear deal with the United States will place limitations on the country's weapons programme, the media reported Saturday.

The deal allows the export of nuclear fuel and technology to energy-hungry India for the first time since it first tested a nuclear device in 1974. US President George W. Bush is expected to sign the accord on Monday.

But the scientists said the final version of the bill, which reconciled versions of the legislation approved by the US House of Representatives and Senate, contained clauses that India had previously objected to.

"The act makes it explicit that if

India conducts such tests, the nuclear cooperation will be terminated," the scientists said in a statement published by the Asian Age newspaper.

Three former chairmen of the country's Atomic Energy Commission were among those who signed the statement.

Under the deal announced by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Bush in July 2005, India, a non-signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), agreed to place its civilian-use reactors under global scrutiny.

The agreement includes a set of international safeguards to be approved by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the global nuclear watchdog, and to which India must adhere.

The scientists also raised

objections to other clauses, which require India's participation in US efforts to "dissuade, isolate, and, if necessary, sanction and contain Iran" in its alleged efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

"These stipulations... constitute intrusion into India's independent decision-making and policy matters," the statement said.

The scientists have appealed to the government to convey their concerns to the US administration. Prime Minister Singh is expected to make a statement on the agreement in parliament on Monday, after which lawmakers will discuss the deal.

The deal still requires the endorsement of the influential 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Chief judge on Saddam panel steps down

AP, Baghdad

The chief investigator on the 10-judge panel that sentenced Saddam Hussein to death said Saturday that he has relinquished that role, allowing another judge to take over the post for the Iraqi High Tribunal.

Raid Juhi said he will remain as a judge and spokesman on the tribunal, which handles the proceedings against the ousted dictator and other former regime members.

Juhi has been a high-profile figure in the trials against Saddam, who was sentenced to death for the killing of 148 Shias in Dujail, north of Baghdad, after a 1982 assassination attempt there against the ousted leader. Two other senior members of Saddam's regime were also sentenced to death in the Nov. 5 ruling by the tribunal.

Juhi said he was replaced during annual elections held by tribunal members because he did not run for re-election to his post as main investigator.

Iraqi PM asks Saddam-era soldiers to join new army

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's embattled prime minister offered an olive branch to former supporters of Saddam Hussein yesterday, calling for them to join the country's new leaders in a national peace process.

At the opening of peace talks, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki urged former soldiers from the ousted dictator's defeated army to join Iraq's new security forces in fighting the armed factions, which are tearing the country apart.

He also urged delegates -- including for the first time representatives of some of Iraq's illegal armed groups -- to review the law, which banned tens of thousands of Saddam's Baath Party activists from working in the civil service.

"The Iraqi army opens its doors to officers and soldiers from the former army who wish to serve the

country," Maliki told hundreds of delegates who braved the chaos on Baghdad's streets to attend the peace conference.

"The national unity government will pay pensions for those who are not reintegrated," added the premier, who has presented the broad-based talks as a fresh opportunity to end Iraq's vicious sectarian bloodletting.

Before the conference began, delegates said that, for the first time, the talks would include former members of Saddam's Baath party and representatives of some of the armed groups fighting the US forces in Iraq.

"We draw a distinction between Baathists whose hands are not stained with blood and those who committed the most heinous crimes against Iraqis and still continue to kill innocent people," Maliki said.

"We draw a distinction between

the two, so as not to harm the first group and so that the second does not escape justice," he declared.

"I call upon parliament to review the constitutional items regarding such committees as de-Baathification and the anti-corruption committee to embody the principle of forgiveness," Maliki said.

After the US-led invasion of March 2003, which toppled Saddam's Sunni-led regime, the occupying force dissolved the Iraqi army and oversaw the sacking of tens of thousands of Baathists from government jobs.

The creation of a huge pool of embittered and armed Sunnis fuelled the subsequent rebellion against the new Shia-led government, and filled the ranks of the nationalist and Islamist insurgent groups fighting US forces.

Since February, when Sunni extremists demolished a revered

Shia shrine in the northern city of Samarra, Iraq has been engulfed in a vicious sectarian war between Sunni and Shia factions that claims more than 100 lives per day.

Maliki and his US allies hope the national reconciliation conference will encourage some hardline elements to join the political process and isolate those determined to continue campaigns of bombing and mass murder.

Naseer al-Ani, spokesman of the conference, admitted not many Baathists had turned up and that some other invitees had also stayed away, a disappointment which he attributed to the dangerous security situation.

"If they boycotted this time, the next time they will see some changes and they will come," he predicted. "We have to talk to those who boycotted and the 1,000-mile road starts with the first mile."

US to hold bilateral talks with N Korea in Beijing

AFP, Narita

US chief negotiator Christopher Hill said Saturday he will meet with his North Korean counterpart in Beijing ahead of the opening of next week's six-way nuclear disarmament talks.

Hill, arriving in Japan for an overnight stop, said he will meet with North Korean envoy Kim Kye-Gwan in Beijing on Sunday.

"I believe I will be meeting with Kim Kye-Gwan bilaterally tomorrow," Hill told reporters at Narita International Airport near Tokyo.

"I look forward to seeing him tomorrow and exchanging views with him," he said.

Kim, speaking earlier Saturday, warned he was not optimistic about the six-way talks due to the "hostile" US stance.

Hill responded that the US was opposed to North Korea's nuclear programme, not the regime itself.

"I have made very clear that the United States has hostile policies to the DPRK's nuclear policy," he said, using the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea.

"I'm not going to negotiate with Mr. Kim through the media," he added, saying the two would have "ample opportunity" to talk in Beijing.

The negotiations -- which include the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia, the United States -- are resuming after a 13-month hiatus during which North Korea tested an atom bomb.

The US has repeatedly met with North Korea on the sidelines of the talks but has refused to hold full-fledged bilateral talks outside the framework of six-way talks.

North Korea walked away from the six-way talks in November 2005, demanding that the US lift financial sanctions on a Macau-based bank accused of laundering and counterfeiting money on behalf of the impoverished regime.

The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution slapping new sanctions on North Korea after its October 9 nuclear test.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas gestures as he gives a key speech yesterday in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Abbas said he has decided to call for early presidential and parliamentary elections to resolve an unprecedented political crisis with the ruling Hamas party.

Iran hails elections as message to West

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran hailed nationwide elections to local councils and a powerful clerical body as a success on Saturday and said healthy voter turnout would help the Islamic Republic confront its Western foes.

Friday's vote was the first popularity test for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose anti-Israel rhetoric alarms many in the West, since he took office 16 months ago.

Official results for the twin polls for local councils and the so-called Assembly of Experts are not expected until late on Saturday at the earliest, officials said.

Unofficial opinion polls and media results cited by some local parties suggested voters backed a range of candidates, giving all political groups something to cheer but allowing none to claim outright victory.

Ali Alavi, an official involved in electoral supervision, told the ISNA students news agency that about 26 million people had voted. That would mean a turnout of around 56 percent, well up on previous votes.

British prostitute killer hunt focused on 5 suspects

AFP, Ipswich

Police in Britain hunting a killer dubbed the "Suffolk Strangler" after the deaths of five prostitutes are focusing on five key suspects, media reports said yesterday.

Detectives want to talk to a taxi driver, a businessman and a man with a liking for outdoor sex, all of whom were clients of Tania Nicol, one of the dead working girls, the Sun newspaper reported.

They are increasingly confident that they are closing in on the killer terrorising the sleepy town of Ipswich, in eastern England, after the discovery of five bodies in ten days, according to the Times.

One man, described as "very interesting" by an unnamed senior police source, has come to the fore of the probe, the Times said, adding that sex offenders and people associated with the drugs trade are also being investigated.

The victims have been confirmed as Nicol, 19; Gemma Adams, 25; Anneli Alderton, 24; Paula Clennell, also 24; and Annette Nicholls, 29.



PHOTO: AFP

(L-R) US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, US President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Peter Pace (R) stand together during a full armed forces retirement ceremony for Rumsfeld at the Pentagon on Friday in Arlington, Virginia. Robert Gates will be sworn in on Dec 18 as Rumsfeld's successor.

US must not quit despite 'ugly' combat: Rumsfeld

REUTERS, Washington

Outgoing Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a lightning rod for critics of the Iraq war, urged the United States on Friday not to retreat in the face of "the agonies and ugliness of combat."

At a farewell ceremony for Rumsfeld on the grounds of the Pentagon, President George W. Bush heaped praise on him, while Vice President Dick Cheney called him the best defence secretary the United States ever had.

Bush announced last month that Rumsfeld would be replaced by former CIA chief Robert Gates after the president's Republicans lost control of Congress, in large part due to voter anger over the Iraq war, Gates takes office on Monday.

"It may well be comforting to some to consider graceful exits from the agonies and, indeed, the ugliness of combat. But the enemy thinks differently," Rumsfeld said at the ceremony, which featured a military parade and brass-band music.

Although he did not mention Iraq in that portion of his speech, his remarks were likely to be seen as a swipe at those calling for a swift withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

He also offered some criticism of US allies.

"Ours is a world of unstable dictators, weapon proliferators and rogue regimes, and each of these enemies seeks out our vulnerability," he said.

"Ours is also a world of many friends and allies, but sadly, realistically, friends and allies with declining defence investment and declining capabilities," he added.

He said that made those allies increasingly vulnerable, requiring the United States to invest more in defence.

Rumsfeld was a star of the Bush administration in the months following the September 11 attacks on the United States. He won praise for a swift campaign to oust Afghanistan's Taliban rulers and his confident televised briefings were popular.

"This man knows how to lead and he did -- and the country is better off for it," Bush declared at Friday's ceremony.

"In every decision Don Rumsfeld made over the past six years, he always put the troops first. And the troops in the field knew it," Bush said.

Cheney, a longtime friend and associate of Rumsfeld, went even further. "I believe the record speaks for itself -- Don Rumsfeld is the finest secretary of defence this nation has ever had," he said.

'Karzai's outbursts strengthen Taliban'

AFP, Islamabad

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's incendiary claims that the Pakistani government is backing the Taliban have harmed ties between the key US allies and could boost the Islamist militia, analysts say.

After dropping hints for months about Islamabad's role in the violence that has claimed 4,000 lives this year, Karzai directly accused the neighbouring Islamic republic on two separate occasions in the past week.

In his strongest language to date, an emotional Karzai alleged on Wednesday that Pakistan was trying to turn the Afghan people into "slaves", and vowed that they would never succeed.

His words have angered Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf, who portrays his country as a bulwark in Washington's "war on terror" and says that the Taliban are a purely

Afghan phenomenon.

"To hurl blame at each other is really counterproductive and strengthens the hand of the Taliban," Pakistani analyst and retired general Talat Masood told AFP.

"Pakistan and Afghanistan must jointly resolve the threat of Talibanisation."

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have long been bedevilled by mutual mistrust.

Pakistan's shadowy Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency helped the Taliban -- mainly comprising ethnic Pashtuns from either side of their shared frontier -- to rise to power in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001.

Hundreds of militants fled across the mountainous border into Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal zone in late 2001 after US-led forces ousted the Taliban for supporting al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden.



PHOTO: AFP

An unidentified teenager climbs over a downed tree on Friday in Kirkland, Washington. At least four people died in the windstorm that left nearly one million residents without power.

Windstorm leaves 1m Americans in the dark

AP, Seattle

The worst windstorm in more than a decade tore through the Pacific Northwest, leaving more than a million people without power Friday and killing at least six.

Winds gusted to a record 69 mph about 1 a.m. at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, breaking the old mark of 65 mph set in 1993. Winds were clocked at 90 mph near Westport on the coast.

Power was knocked out at one of the airport's concourses until late Friday morning. Dozens of flights were cancelled, including all American Airlines service through the morning hours. Flights were also cancelled at Portland International Airport in Oregon, and Amtrak cancelled service between Seattle and Portland after downed trees and mudslides blocked the tracks.

US legislators in Cuba to jump start dialogue

REUTERS, Havana

The largest delegation from the US Congress to visit Cuba since 1959 arrived in Havana on Friday seeking to open a dialogue with the communist government of acting President Raul Castro despite White House opposition to such contacts.

The stepping aside of ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who has not appeared in public for four months, has set the stage for ending political hostility dating from the start of the Cold War, they said.

"We sense this is an important time and we hope to meet with officials and hopefully launch a new era in US-Cuba relations," said Rep Jeff Flake, an Arizona Republican.

The six Democrats and four Republicans hope to meet with Raul Castro, who took over July 31 after his brother underwent emergency surgery for an undisclosed

illness.

Raul Castro two weeks ago said he was open to negotiations with Washington to settle the longstanding dispute that emerged after the Castros seized power in a 1959 revolution and turned Cuba into a Soviet ally.

The Bush administration, which opposes a "dynastic succession" from one Castro brother to the other, has rejected talks in the absence of democratic reform to Cuba's one-party state.

The State Department opposed the trip, delegation members said. "The bottom line is, we think it is the right thing to do," said Massachusetts Democrat Jim McGovern. "I've long thought our policy toward Cuba has been arrogant and dumb."

The visiting legislators said momentum was gathering in Washington for a new chapter in ties with Cuba and changes in US policy are likely next year under a Democrat-controlled Congress.