

Seoul hails nuke deal, may resume aid to Pyongyang

AFP, Seoul

South Korea yesterday hailed the six-nation agreement on scrapping North Korea's nuclear programme as a "turning point" and said it plans to resume high-level talks with the North to discuss aid.

President Roh Moo-Hyun said the deal announced Tuesday in Beijing could lead to a permanent peace agreement on the divided peninsula.

One day after the North agreed to disable its nuclear plants in return for a million tonnes of energy aid and diplomatic benefits, both North and South Korea announced they want to resume ministerial talks suspended since July.

Officials were to meet Thursday in Kaesong, just north of the heavily fortified frontier, to make preparations for such talks.

Presidential security adviser

Yun Byung-Se said the resumption of South Korea's massive food and fertiliser aid to the impoverished communist state would be on the agenda when the ministerial talks reopen at a date to be fixed.

South Korea suspended a shipment of 100,000 tonnes of fertiliser aid and 500,000 tonnes of rice after North Korea test-launched missiles in July.

It maintained the aid suspension after the North's October nuclear test.

Unification Minister Lee Jae-Joung, in charge of relations with the North, hailed the Beijing agreement as a "critical turning point" in creating a new peace regime on the peninsula.

North and South Korea have remained technically at war since the 1950-53 conflict ended without a peace treaty.

The nuclear agreement combined with Wall Street's overnight rally to send share prices rising 1.25 percent or 17.66 points to close at the year's best level of 1,436.10.

Roh, in comments released Wednesday, said he expects smooth implementation of the deal.

"What is quite important in the agreements, aside from the settlement of North Korea's nuclear issue, is the phrase that says talks should start to discuss a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula," he said during a state visit to Spain.

"Furthermore, the agreement calls for talks aimed at establishing a multilateral security cooperation system in Northeast Asia and this has a wide scope," Roh said, according to a presidential statement.

The agreement says the six

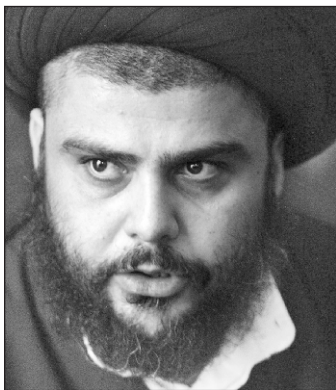
countries -- the two Koreas, China, Japan, the United States and Russia -- will "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula" at an appropriate separate forum.

The United States, which fought for the South against North Korea and China in 1950-53, has raised the prospect of signing a peace treaty to replace the armistice if a final deal with the North is reached.

Roh called the nuclear agreement very specific and substantial.

"All parties of the six-nation talks faithfully produced the agreements. Thus I expect that the agreements will be smoothly enforced in the future," he said.

South Korean conservatives, who accuse Roh's government of appeasement of the North through its engagement policy, gave the deal a more guarded welcome.



Sadr flees Iraq for Iran?

AFP, Baghdad

Radical anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr has fled Iraq for Iran, a US defence official said yesterday, a claim vehemently denied by the Shiite leader's supporters.

"We have seen the reports and believe them to be accurate," the official told AFP in Baghdad, referring to reports in the US media that the firebrand preacher had driven to Tehran ahead of a ramped-up security plan.

The Pentagon describes Sadr's Mahdi Army militia as the most dangerous single faction in the vicious sectarian war gripping Iraq, accusing rogue elements of the force of killing hundreds of Sunni civilians.

The defence official spoke on condition of anonymity, as has become typical when US military sources make allegations against local and Iranian leaders.

Media reports quoted US intelligence officials as saying Sadr had left Iraq two to three weeks ago to avoid being killed or captured by US troops carrying out a new operation to put an end to sectarian violence.

But Nassar al-Rubaie, the head of Sadr's parliamentary bloc, insisted he was "still inside Iraq and working normally" but would not say exactly where.

And Bassem al-Aathari, an official at Sadr's office in Najaf south of Baghdad, said the cleric is still in the Shiite holy city and that if he was to travel abroad this would be announced as had been the case for previous trips.

"It's ridiculous. It's nothing," Rubaie told AFP in Baghdad.

"If the US army already in Iraq is incapable of resisting Sadr, what difference would 20,000 reinforcements make?" he demanded.

BEIJING ALLAYS FEAR AT DELHI TALKS Anti-satellite weapon test not aimed at any country

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

China has assured India that its recent anti-satellite weapon test was not directed at any country and that it too was opposed to weaponisation of outer space.

India also told China that it has constituted a team of experts to operationalize expert-level mechanism on shared trans-border rivers.

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing conveyed this to his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee during their talks here yesterday on a whole range of bilateral, regional and international issues.

After the nearly two and half hour of talks between the two ministers, Indian Ambassador to China Nirupama Rao told reporters here that the Chinese side had provided a suo motu briefing to India on Beijing's satellite-killing missile test last month.

She said the Chinese side stressed that Beijing was against weaponisation and militarization of outer space and that the test was conducted was of "purely technological and scientific nature".

The test had evoked sharp reaction from the United States,

Australia and Japan and set off concerns in India whose leaders cautioned against induction of weapons in outer space.

This was the first meeting between the foreign ministers of the two Asian giants since China had successfully launched a missile against one of its ageing weather satellites, sparking global concerns over weaponization of outer space.

Mukherjee, in turn, conveyed India's principled opposition to weaponization of space and said outer space should be used as a common heritage of mankind, Rao said.

He also told Li that the international community should provide a legal framework to prevent weaponization of space.

The two countries agreed to set up a hotline between their foreign ministers and to liberalise visa regimes as part of initiatives to strengthen their ties.

They also stressed that the two countries needed to "further intensify" their dialogue for early settlement of the boundary issue.

The two countries agreed to undertake a number of other measures including having an institutionalised dialogue mechanism on strategic issues and Foreign Office consultations, hold joint working group meetings and hold discussions on counter-terrorism measures.

The two countries will also open consulates in Kolkata and Guangzhou province in China this year.



Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing (L) and his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

EU wants to sanction firms that hire illegal immigrants

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission will propose at the end of May draft legislation to sanction companies who hire illegal immigrants in the European Union's 27 member countries, EU officials said Tuesday.

Employers involved in such activities will mainly face financial penalties, such as refunding the social welfare system for lost revenue or be obliged to pay the immigrants, who are often exploited, a salary he would normally earn.

Should the illegal immigrant need to be expelled, the employer could be called on to pay the costs of sending the person home.

"We're not thinking of criminal sanctions, more of acting in a preventive way," one EU official explained, on condition of anonymity.

The measures would also oblige employers to regularly verify work permits of those who come from countries outside the EU, and update the authorities on the details.

"We are not aiming at immigrants, more at employers," the official said.

The European Commission considers that black market labour in the building, restaurant and textile sectors are a major attraction for people looking to make their home in the EU.

The draft legislation would have to be endorsed by the EU's member states.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese hold pictures of late prime minister Rafiq Hariri during a ceremony to mark his second anniversary of death yesterday in the heart of Beirut. Tens of thousands of people swarmed to the Lebanese capital to commemorate Hariri's murder two years ago.

British police told Manipur votes as Punjab result hangs in balance

AFP, London

British police were told Tuesday to apologise after "aggressive" anti-terror raids last year in which two Muslims were arrested but later freed without charge, triggering protests.

One man was shot and injured during the controversial raids in Forest Gate, east London, which came amid heightened security fears in Britain following the July 2005 suicide bombings in London.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) said it had received 153 complaints from residents affected by the "terrifying experience" when police burst into two houses in Forest Gate on the night of June 1, 2006.

At least two of the 11 occupants were hit, one over the head, while the IPCC also received complaints about swearing, weapons being pointed and neglect of the arrested men while in custody.

But the report clears police of the most serious allegations, including use of excessive force, and has been described as a "whitewash" by Mohammed Abdul Kahar, who was arrested alongside his brother, Abul Koyair.

It is likely to complicate relations

between some British Muslims and police at a sensitive time -- earlier this month, nine people were arrested in Birmingham, central England, in anti-terror raids which again sparked protests.

Six men were charged, one over an alleged plot to kidnap and kill a British soldier, and three were released without charge.

One of those freed, Abu Bakr, later said that Britain had become a "police state" for Muslims and that British terror laws were "designed specifically" for them.

Kahar, whose shooting in the shoulder during the Forest Gate raids was ruled accidental by a previous IPCC report, said the latest probe gave police a "green light" to carry out anti-terror operations any way they wanted.

He complained that the police never disclosed who the "criminal" informant was or what intelligence they had.

In a joint statement issued through their solicitors, families caught up in the events said they were "shocked" that the IPCC had not probed how police had assessed the "entirely false" intelligence which led to the raids.

AFP, New Delhi

The remote northeastern state of Manipur went to the polls yesterday, as elections in India's breadbasket Punjab province saw the ruling Congress neck and neck with the opposition.

The elections in insurgency-hit Manipur and Punjab -- to be followed next Wednesday by the northern state of Uttarakhand -- are seen as "a popularity test" for India's Congress party, political analyst Rashid Kidwai said.

The Congress, headed by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, administers the three states as well as the national government in New Delhi.

In northern Punjab state, where the Congress faces an alliance between the Akali Dal, a regional Sikh party, and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, exit polls predicted a "photo-finish" after voting ended late Tuesday.

Surveys by two leading news channels predicted near equal votes for both groups in Punjab.

Some 65 percent of 16 million Punjabi voters turned out to elect 117 members of the state legislature from 1,050 contestants.

Traditionally analysts say state polls do not affect the national government.

However Kidwai noted: "The results in Punjab ... will be a reflection

on the standing of the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (a Sikh) in India's only Sikh majority state."

Congress won power in Punjab in 2002, following a bitterly fought electoral battle with the then-ruling combination of the Akali Dal and BJP.

No ruling party has been re-elected to office in Punjab since 1972.

In Manipur, Wednesday saw the second phase of polling with Congress promising to tone down a tough anti-terror law and pledging more money for development.

"People lined up to vote well before polling started in many places. Polling so far is encouraging," senior election officer P.K. Singh told AFP by telephone.

Some 738,679 voters were eligible to vote to decide the fate of 155 candidates.

Voting for the third and last phase of polls in Manipur is scheduled for February 23.

Vote counts in the three states -- Punjab, Uttarakhand and Manipur -- will begin on February 27.

After the election results are in, the focus will switch to Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, which goes to the polls at the end of May and is currently held by a regional opposition party.



PHOTO: AFP

A Yemeni woman wearing "niqab" buys roses at a shop decorated for Valentine's Day yesterday.

Dictator's aide new Turkmen president

AFP, Ashgabat

Regime loyalist Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov was sworn in as Turkmenistan's new president at a grand ceremony yesterday amid hopes for reform in this resource-rich Central Asian nation.

Berdymukhammedov, a former health minister who was appointed interim president after the death of dictator Saparmurat Niyazov in December, was declared the winner of a controversial weekend presidential election.

"Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov received 89.23 percent of the votes," the head of Turkmenistan's electoral commission, Murad Karyev, told a meeting of the country's highest legislative body, the People's Council.

"The people have confided their destiny in you," Karyev told

Berdymukhammedov, who then embraced the Turkmen flag and took an oath on the country's constitution.

The presidential election on Sunday was the first in the country's history to feature multiple candidates but the vote was criticised by Western diplomats and exiled opposition leaders as rigged.

Ahead of the election, ordinary Turkmen voiced hopes for an easing of the strict authoritarian rules set by Niyazov, including restrictions on international travel and limited access to the Internet.

The five other candidates in the election were mostly little-known officials who were thought to have no real chance of winning and all the candidates were members of the country's only authorised political party.