

US, N Korea end talks on optimistic note

AFP, New York

The United States on Tuesday wrapped up initial landmark talks with North Korea on normalising ties, optimistic that the Stalinist state will stay on track in disbanding its nuclear arms programme.

"They were good, businesslike and very comprehensive discussions," US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill told reporters at the end of the two-day meeting in New York with his North Korean counterpart Kim Kye-gwan.

The talks setting the stage for normalization of diplomatic relations were aimed at smoothing implementation of a milestone agreement reached with Pyongyang on February 13 in six-nation talks that also included South Korea, Japan, Russia and China. Under the accord, North Korea agreed to close and seal its key Yongbyon nuclear facility -- long suspected to be the center of its nuclear program -- within 60 days and admit UN nuclear inspectors in return for 50,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil.

"I would say there was a sense of optimism from both sides that we get through this 60-day period and we will achieve all of our objectives that are set out in the February 13 agreement," Hill said.

But he conceded there could be



US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill (left) and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan.

complications after the two-month stage when "the difficult phase of disbanding" the Yongbyon facility and getting the full details of North Korea's nuclear program came up.

The usually tightlipped Kim said he was optimistic about the outcome of the talks.

"I think everything will go well," he told South Korea's news agency Yonhap at the start of the meeting Monday.

Kim also reportedly told his South Korean counterpart Chun Yung-Woo in separate talks in New York that North Korea was willing to shut down its nuclear plants in an "irreversible" manner.

Hill insisted that nothing less

than complete dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear arsenal was necessary for any establishing of official ties to end more than 50 years of feuding between Washington and the reclusive Asian state.

He told Kim that Pyongyang should "fulfil their part of the bargain -- which is complete denuclearization" before normalization of relations.

North Korea should also come clean about its highly enriched uranium program as well as its plutonium activity centered on the Yongbyon facility during denuclearization talks in Beijing as early as next week, he said.

Pyongyang reportedly made "massive purchases of expensive equipment" from Pakistani A.Q. Khan's illicit nuclear network to drive the highly enriched uranium program, Hill charged.

Enriched uranium is used as fuel for nuclear reactors, but highly enriched uranium can be used to make nuclear bombs.

"They need to come clean on it, explain what they have been doing, why they have been doing it, and ultimately they need to abandon it," Hill said. "I think we are owed a pretty clear answer why all these purchases were made and how far they have gotten into the process."

N Korea calls off Japan talks in Hanoi

AFP, Hanoi

North Korea called off scheduled talks with Japan in Hanoi set for yesterday afternoon and aimed at normalising relations between the two countries, an official at Pyongyang's embassy said.

It was not immediately clear if the talks would resume at a later point.

"The meeting, originally scheduled to take place in the afternoon, has been called off," said a North Korean embassy official who refused to give his name.

"We cannot disclose the reason now. Maybe we will explain it later."

The official declined to say whether the North Korean side would meet the Japanese delegation again during the talks, which had been scheduled to last until Thursday.

Japan and North Korea had opened their first formal bilateral talks in more than a year earlier in the day in Hanoi.

They are aimed at ending an emotional row over Pyongyang's past abductions of Japanese citizens and to normalise relations in line with a groundbreaking February 13 agreement designed to rein in the North's nuclear programme.

A Japanese foreign ministry official said that North Korea had informed the Japanese delegation that the afternoon talks were suspended.

"But it's still not known if they want to hold the talks later in the afternoon or completely cancel the negotiations," said the official.

S Korean PM resigns, may join race for presidency

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's first woman prime minister, Han Myeong-Sook, formally resigned yesterday amid speculation she may join the race for the December presidential election.

President Roh Moo-Hyun is likely to nominate former finance minister Han Duck-Soo to replace her, Yonhap news agency said, quoting sources at the presidential Blue House.

"I'm now returning to politics where I used to be," the outgoing prime minister told journalists as she wrapped up her 10 months in office with a ceremony.

Questioned whether she would seek the liberal Uri Party's nomination for the president, she said: "I'll take my time to think about it."

Han is credited for a low-profile but firm leadership style and her background as a pro-democracy activist.

The embattled Uri is struggling with low public support and Roh, who cannot stand again, is also suffering a popularity slump. He quit the party last month in an attempt to improve its chances in December.

Potential candidates from the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) are far ahead of Uri's possible candidates in opinion polls.

Uri last month lost its parliamentary majority to the GNP after a series of defections by lawmakers. It is preparing to disband and create a new party with other liberals.

Roh is expected to nominate a new prime minister on Friday, Han Duck-Soo, a career administrator who is currently Roh's adviser on free trade negotiations with the United States, is the most likely candidate.

Iran to take part in Iraq conference

AFP, Tehran

Iran for the first time gave unequivocal confirmation yesterday it will take part in a conference on Iraq's security which will also be attended by arch foe the United States.

Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said Iran would send a deputy foreign minister to Saturday's Baghdad conference bringing together world powers and Iraq's neighbours on ending the daily bloodshed in the country.

"The Iranian delegation will be headed by the deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs (Abbas Aragchi)," Mottaki told reporters.

He said Iran would take part "with the aim of helping the Iraqi government and people."

"We hope that the results of the Baghdad conference will be a clear message that the countries in the region stand by the Iraqi government in combatting instability," Mottaki added.

"Considering this attitude, we hope that the result will be that an end to the presence of foreign forces in Iraq is nearing."

Iran, which has forged strong relations with the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad after the toppling of its enemy Saddam Hussein, has repeatedly said the immediate withdrawal of US troops is the best way to stabilise Iraq.

It appears unlikely however that the conference will be the scene for bilateral talks and a thawing of relations between Iran and the United States.

The Iranian foreign ministry has

said no direct talks were planned while the US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, said that no decision had yet been taken on US-Iran talks at the meeting.

Iran and the United States have had no diplomatic relations since Washington severed ties in 1980 in the wake of the seizure of its embassy in Tehran by Islamist students.

Any direct contacts between the two sides would mark a major break in the frozen relations, which have been marked by mutual recriminations and enmity over almost three decades.

Washington has repeatedly accused Tehran of fomenting the violence in Iraq and arming Shiite extremists who have carried out deadly attacks on Iraqis and US troops. Iran vehemently denies the charges.

Israel detains dozens in Ramallah raid

AFP, Ramallah

Israeli troops firing guns and grenades stormed Palestinian military intelligence headquarters in Ramallah yesterday, seizing more than 50 men, Palestinian security sources said.

About 100 army vehicles surrounded the building in the early hours of yesterday, with troops ordering people to come out before they moved in.

The sources said the Israeli forces detained more than 50 people, while the Israeli army said it had arrested 18 wanted men. There were no reports of injuries.

"The army arrested 18 Palestinians wanted for attacks and attempted kidnappings of Israeli soldiers and civilians," an army spokesman said, adding that weapons and explosives were also seized.

The Palestinian sources confirmed that 18 people had been arrested. It was not immediately clear whether the rest of those detained had been released.

An Israeli security source said those arrested "were using the infrastructure of the Palestinian security services as a base to carry out their operations."

"The Palestinian Authority knew this and did nothing to fight their terrorist activities," the source said.

Palestinian military intelligence director General Majed Faraj said the army had detained 55 members of his service and five other Palestinians in an adjacent building.

Faraj said soldiers had opened fire and launched grenades before entering the building, where they ransacked offices and confiscated assault rifles and pistols he said were the legal property of his force.

Palestinian security sources said some of those detained were on a list of more than 400 militants that Israel agreed not to pursue under a 2005 accord between president Mahmud Abbas and then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon.

Nobel Prize stolen

AFP, Berkeley

A Nobel Prize won by late US physicist Ernest O. Lawrence in 1939 has been stolen from its display case at the University of California, Berkeley, police said Tuesday.

The coin-shaped trophy featuring a profile of Alfred Nobel is valued at 4,200 dollars and was the first ever Nobel Prize to be awarded to the prestigious university.

"It's considered an artifact," a police spokesman said. "It is cast of 23-carat gold, dates to 1939 and has several features that are unique from the modern prize."

The prize was discovered missing on March 1, police said.

Lawrence won the Nobel Prize for his invention of the particle-accelerating cyclotron, and later gained further prominence for his key involvement in the design of the atomic bomb.

Authorities are treating the case as grand theft, but say there are no suspects to date.

The school is offering a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the thief.

The medal bears the Latin phrase *Inventum vitam junct excoluisse per artes*, which loosely translated means, "And they bettered life on Earth by their newly found mastery."

C'wealth soldiers fight 'racism' in British army

AFP, London

Soldiers from Commonwealth countries are forming a trade union to fight alleged racism within the British armed forces, the BBC reported yesterday.

The BBC said serving soldier Marlon Clancy was setting up the British Commonwealth Soldiers Union which will be restricted to giving advice to members as it is powerless to strike or negotiate.

"In some units, the white soldiers will be given priority for courses over the black soldiers, and the black soldier -- no matter how long he's been in, if he has been in four years longer than the white soldier -- he will be put behind the white soldier," Clancy told the BBC.

The British Broadcasting Corporation said the move comes amid complaints of widespread

racism, unfair treatment and a lack of welfare support.

The BBC said the number of male and female armed forces personnel from Commonwealth countries has swollen from 435 in 2000 to 6,000 -- the bulk of them from Fiji -- as the ministry finds it harder to recruit people born in Britain.

In 2000, there were just 435 from the 53 former British colonies that are part of the Commonwealth but that figure has since risen to 6,000, with Fiji providing the lion's share of them.

A Jamaican-born soldier who was identified only by his first name Wayne told the BBC he was forced to do menial tasks and faced racist abuse from not just non-commissioned officers but senior officers.

"You're niggers. You come over

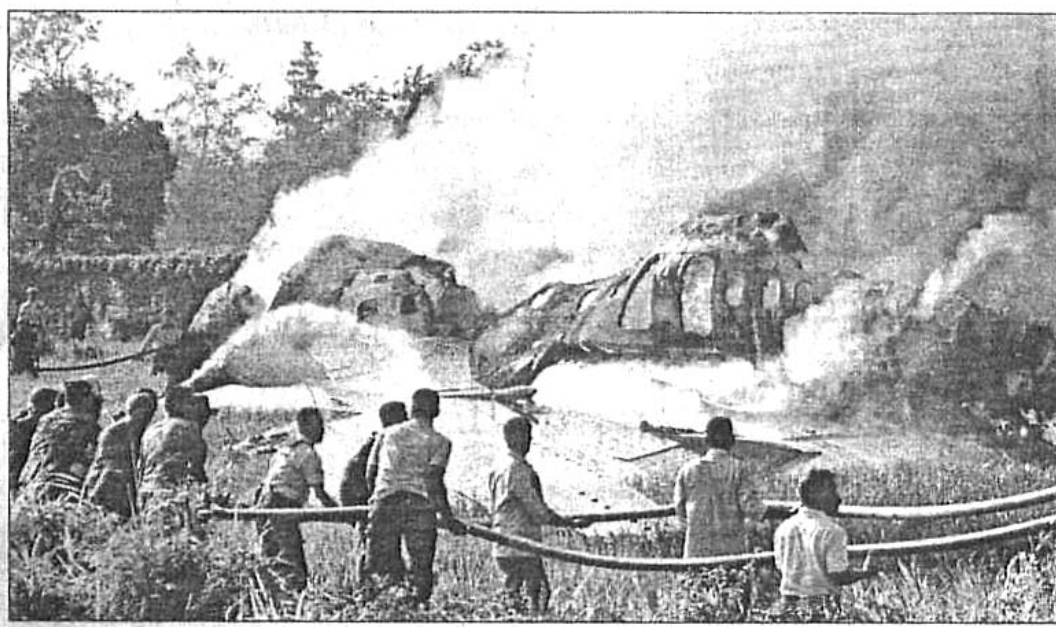
here and take all the married quarters and taking up the space in the country. You need to go back to your country," said the soldier.

His wife described him as a broken man and complained she had suffered similar abuse.

The Ministry of Defence said there was no evidence of endemic racism in the army and special provision was offered to Commonwealth soldiers.

But Lieutenant General Freddie Viggers, who is in charge of armed forces recruitment, told the BBC "these are disturbing stories" that must be looked into.

"We do take all allegations and incidents of harassment or discrimination on grounds of race or gender or religion very seriously indeed. It's bad behaviour and it's not good enough in a professional army," he said.



Rescue workers try to put out the flames of the burning fuselage of a Garuda Boeing 737-400 jet minutes after it crash landed at Yogyakarta airport yesterday killing 23 people.

Former White House aide Libby guilty in trial of CIA spy leak

AFP, Washington

Former White House aide Lewis "Scooter" Libby was convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice Tuesday, after a trial that rocked Washington's political and media elite and probed deep into the US rationale for war with Iraq.

Libby, ex-chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney, faces up to 25 years in jail for his role in a scandal centering on the outing of a glamorous CIA spy and a row over Saddam Hussein's alleged bid to build nuclear weapons.

Jurors handed down their verdict after 10 days of deliberations, convicting the 56-year-old of four of the five counts against him, including lying to the FBI.

Libby had denied wrongdoing in a case brought by hard-charging special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, over whether White House officials intentionally leaked the name of CIA agent Valerie Plame to reporters.

Plame's husband, former US diplomat Joseph Wilson, was a

fierce critic of Bush administration claims that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction programs were a justification for invasion in 2003.

Bush's critics charged senior officials deliberately disclosed Plame's identity to punish her husband, though Libby was never charged with the federal crime of blowing the cover of an undercover CIA officer.

The White House, battered by the scandal for several years, said President George W. Bush "respected the jury's verdict, that he was saddened for Scooter Libby and his family."

But spokeswoman Dana Perino refused to discuss whether Bush would consider pardoning Libby, saying she was "aware of no such request."

Libby, who also faces a fine which could stretch to millions of dollars, left the courthouse, grim-faced with his defense team after the verdict, after sitting impassively inside court as his fate was announced.

His lead lawyer Theodore Wells said the team plan to file for a new trial, and if their request is rejected will lodge an appeal.

"We are very disappointed in the verdict of the jurors," Wells said. "We believe, as we said at the time of his indictment, that he is totally innocent -- totally innocent -- and that he did not do anything wrong."

Fitzgerald said he planned to lay no further charges in the investigation.

"Having someone, a high-level official do that under oath in a national security investigation is something that can never be acceptable," he said.

A sentencing hearing was set for June 5.

At one stage, Fitzgerald had seemed set to probe even deeper into the White House, but the Bush administration escaped much worse political damage when he opted not to lay charges against top political operative Karl Rove.

Bush's political opponents leapt on the verdict as punishment for the White House which critics

saw twisted intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs to justify the 2003 invasion.

"It's about time someone in the Bush administration has been held accountable for the campaign to manipulate intelligence and discredit war critics," Democratic Senate Majority leader Harry Reid said.

The trial "revealed deeper truths about Vice President Cheney's role in this sordid affair. Now President Bush must pledge not to pardon Libby for his criminal conduct," Reid said.

The trial, which began in January, lifted the lid on how deep the obsession ran inside the White House with news coverage of the administration's justification for the Iraq war, and exposed the vice president's office to unflattering scrutiny.

It also saw a parade of top Washington journalists in the witness box, forcing them to dish details on their sometimes cosy relationship with sources high in the US government.

Indonesia revises quake death toll down to 52

AFP, Jakarta

Relief operations swung into gear yesterday a day after a powerful quake rocked the Indonesian island of Sumatra as a senior official revised the death toll down to 52.

The force of the 6.3-magnitude earthquake, which was followed by an almost equally powerful aftershock, stunned villagers used to the tremors that often shake this mountainous region of West Sumatra.

Rescue officials earlier said the quake, which hit early Tuesday, killed 71 people and injured hundreds, many seriously.

A spokesman for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono revised that figure to 52, saying some of the dead had been counted twice, although the Antara state news agency cited an unconfirmed breakdown of fatalities adding up to 88.

"We have earthquakes now and then but nothing as strong as yesterday's. I have never experienced an earthquake that strong," said Emi Zurniati, 42, her eyes reddened from crying.

Speaking in front of a crumbled home in Sumani village, one of the hardest hit areas of West Sumatra's

Solok district, she said her mother and two nieces had been killed in the quake.

The girls died in a fire that swept through a primary school after a wall collapsed on it. Her mother was killed in a narrow nearby alleyway.

Altogether nine people died in Sumani, five of them primary school pupils and the rest women hit in the alley by the same collapsing wall.

Zurniati, who had been sweeping in front of her home when the quake struck, said the ground shook so strongly that she could not even stand.

"Even crouching, I was tossed right and left," she said.

The quake's epicentre was located 49 kilometres (30 miles) northeast of the West Sumatran capital Padang, according to the US Geological Survey, but was also felt in neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore.

"This time, it was not only very strong but also lasted a long time," said 75-year-old Nurbani, a grandmother sitting under a large plastic sheet strung between trees in front of her house in Tanah Garam, a village near Sumani.



Lewis "Scooter" Libby, walks out of federal court after the verdict Tuesday.

N Ireland polls aim to trigger lasting self-rule

AFP, Dublin

Northern Ireland's voters trudge back to the polls yesterday for what is being billed as a make-or-break chance at building a lasting power-sharing administration between Protestants and Catholics.

The elections to the Northern Irish Assembly are a key step towards restoring devolved government in the long-troubled British province, more than four years after it was suspended and handed back to London amid cross-community mistrust.

But just hours before the polls were due to open at 7:00 am local time, both communities' main parties were at each other's throats.

It is the 10th time that the 1.1 million-strong Northern Irish electorate has been called to vote since the April 1998 peace accord which largely ended 30 bloody years of the "Troubles" between the two communities.

The Democratic Unionists (DUP), a hardline conservative Protestant party which strongly favours Northern Ireland remaining a part of the United Kingdom, are expected to top the polls.

Their foes Sinn Fein -- a Catholic socialist group favouring integration into the Republic of Ireland, and the ex-political wing of violence-renouncing paramilitaries the Irish Republican Army (IRA) -- are tipped to come second.

The script agreed by London and Dublin says the pair are meant to form a semi-autonomous executive by March 26.

But the wrangling on thrashing out a deal seems like it might go to the wire.

"Until we are satisfied that Sinn Fein are democratic political party, we will not be sitting down in government with them," said DUP MP Gregory Campbell during a BBC television debate late Tuesday.

He said Sinn Fein needed to be "dragged kicking and screaming into democracy."

"Let's keep turning the screw until we get them where we need them to be. But I don't see that they can make up the ground between now and March 26."

Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams accused the DUP of "posturing," "bombast" and blocking the path to a settlement.

"Either we go back to conflict, the blood, the tears we've all been through, or we go forward and build a new future for the people of Ireland," he said.

"Sinn Fein's resolve is that we will never, ever see this (the Troubles) happening again."

He defined the key question as: "Can (DUP leader) Ian Paisley say yes?"

"I just wish that ordinary Unionist voters would cop on to (realise) what the DUP are playing at."