

Space race heats up in Asia

AP, Tokyo

Japan is set to launch its first lunar orbiter this summer, but exploring the moon is just part of the mission.

The other goal is to catch up with China, the new leader in Asia's space race.

Japan's space agency JAXA announced last week that the much-delayed SELENE probe will be launched in August aboard an H-2A rocket, the mainstay of Japan's space program.

JAXA says the SELENE project is the largest lunar mission since the U.S. Apollo program. It involves placing a main satellite in orbit at an altitude of about 60 miles and deploying two smaller satellites in polar orbits. Researchers will use data gathered by the probes to study the moon's origin and evolution.

"This mission will involve observation of the whole moon, not just parts of it," said JAXA spokesman Satoki Kurokawa. "It is a very ambitious project."

The mission is a stepping stone in Japan's plan to more aggressively pursue space objectives including a lunar landing and, possibly, manned missions in space. To raise public awareness, JAXA is conducting a "Wish Upon the Moon" campaign that allows people to send brief messages up with the orbiter.

Japan leaped ahead of Asia by launching the region's first satellite in 1972. Now it is struggling to keep up in the most heated space race since the Cold War competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

China launched its first manned space flight in 2003. A second mission in 2005 put two astronauts into orbit for a week, and a third manned launch is planned for next year. This year, China also plans to launch a probe that will orbit the moon.

Earlier this month, the country launched a Long March 3-A rocket that sent a navigation satellite into orbit as part of its effort to build a global positioning system. The satellite is the fourth China has launched as part of the Compass navigation system, which is expected to be operational in 2008.

Japan, meanwhile, has met with

one setback after another.

Last month, one of its four spy satellites became unresponsive due to apparent electrical problems. The three other satellites were functioning normally, but the failure left its multibillion dollar, long-awaited spy network with a big hole.

A mission to Mars had to be abandoned two years ago after the probe moved off course.

In January, JAXA gave up on a moon-landing mission. The Lunar A probe, originally scheduled to lift off in 1995, was to plant two seismic sensors on the lunar surface, but development of the penetrator probes took so long the mission's mother ship fell into disrepair.

An ongoing mission to bring back the first samples from an asteroid may be lost in space. Last month, JAXA said the Hayabusa probe succeeded in getting close to an asteroid and may have been able to pick up samples, but admitted a fuel leak in 2005 and subsequent communications problems have put its 2010 return in doubt.

The \$269 million SELENE is four years behind schedule. Japan launched a moon probe in 1990, but it did not orbit the moon as SELENE is intended to do.

"We are confident that we will succeed," JAXA's Kurokawa said. "We are being very careful, as always."

Other Asian nations are joining in the race.

In 2000, South Korea broke ground on a \$277 million rocket launch site. It plans, with Russian help, to put a small satellite in orbit next year.

India is hoping to launch its Chandrayaan-1 moon mission this year or next, though its technological prowess and \$700 million space budget remain well behind its ambitions.

China spends at least \$1.2 billion on space-related projects and the U.S. about \$16 billion.

Nato chief cannot confirm Iranian arms in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

The commander of Nato forces in Afghanistan, US General Dan McNeill, said yesterday he was unable to confirm the interception of Iranian-made mortars and explosives in the country.

"I don't deny that position and I'm very interested how the insurgents might be helped and who might have helped the insurgents," McNeill told reporters in the Afghan capital.

"Obviously, the US Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff have far more information than I do right now," he added.

General Peter Pace, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, said Tuesday that coalition forces had intercepted Iranian-made mortars and explosives in Afghanistan destined for the Taliban.

After 30 years of war, Afghanistan is awash with weapons of all kinds and of different origins. Iran, in particular, furnished the Northern Alliance with weapons during their struggle against the Taliban government.

McNeill, the head of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), also said he had no hard intelligence on the existence of training camps for Afghan insurgents in Iranian territory.

"There is no report of that fact," he said.

A number of American officials have accused the Iranian Revolutionary Guards of training and arming Shiite militants in Iraq.

Hasina flies

FROM PAGE 1

of the reasons for the government measures.

The foreign, civil aviation and tourism ministries and the inspector general of police have been asked to take necessary steps in line with the decision.

Law enforcement agencies and immigration at air and land ports have been alerted to that end while different airlines have been asked not to carry her.

In reaction to the developments, Hasina told different international media that she would get back to the country on schedule.

Meanwhile at home, the arrest of presidium member Kazi Zafarullah came as a blow to most of the presidium members, said a senior AL leader preferring not to be named.

"We have to tread very carefully though we are sure good days are ahead for the party that polls the highest votes individually," the leader added.

Talking to The Daily Star, a number of leaders said they believe the situation will change for the better shortly as the home ministry press note itself says the measures against the AL president are temporary. They hope the government will not prolong the way things are now for the sake of democracy and the people.

In the meantime, the AL will closely monitor the activities of the government.

Titas gas field

FROM PAGE 1

Brahmanbaria had been noticed for the last three to five years. The phenomenon reached an alarming state since the last dry season.

After identifying excessive gas pressure, the authorities assigned local petroleum exploration company Bapex last month to fix the uncontrolled leakage. It tried to control the pressure by injecting chemicals and mud into the well and finally by burning the gas.

"But the situation turned so serious that it was beyond Bapex's reach. That's why it [Bapex] stopped injecting liquids [chemicals] in the third well fearing a major blowout," said MA Baqi, general manager (geology) of Bapex.

As there is no expert on blowouts in Bangladesh, the authorities through discussions decided to hire a foreign expert, he added.

Asked if the government is responsible for taking too long to decide on hiring a foreign expert, he justified by saying that Bapex had handled such cases before.

"The issue did not reach the breakaway point when we should

have hired a foreign consultant," he said.

When asked who would be responsible for the damages caused by the gas release, engineer Shahidul Abedin, managing director of BGFCL, said, "Such incidents are professional hazards."

"We identified excessive gas pressure in the third well only in March this year. This might be due to leakage or structural reasons. We tried our best to control it with the help of Bapex," Abedin explained.

He hoped that the situation would be under control very soon, but could not specify any timeline.

"Once we are able to kill the third well, we will take care of other faults in the gas field," he said.

The 38-year-old Titas Gas Field produces 400 mmfd gas against the country's total gas demand of 1500 mmfd. Discovered in the early sixties by Shell Oil, Titas was estimated to have a gas reserve of 5.12 trillion cubic feet (tcf). After four decades, the reserve now stands at 2.78 tcf.

The issue did not reach the breakaway point when we should

Hasina returns

FROM PAGE 1

after a meeting with Finance Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam at the Secretariat.

Matin, also the chairman of national co-ordination committee for combating crime, declined to make any comment on the press note issued by the government on Wednesday, terming it 'sensitive'. "The press note was issued by the home ministry and I should not say anything beyond what is mentioned in it," he added.

Asked whether actions would be taken against any other political leaders, he said, "I do not know."

Matin also expressed his ignorance about the activities centring Khaleda Zia's leaving home.

When his attention was drawn towards the clarification sought by British High Commission on the press note, he said that the government would do.

Meanwhile, Law, Justice and Information Adviser Mainul Islam said yesterday that he did not know who had telephoned the newspaper offices on Wednesday to stop publication of the statement of Hasina, after a ban was imposed on her returning home.

The PID (Press Information Department) did not do that, he told the journalists at his secretariat office, claiming that the media is enjoying freedom.

He, however, observed that since there is a state of emergency in the country, it is not negative if PID gives any suggestions. "The fundamental rights of the people do not work at present," he added.

Khaleda family

FROM PAGE 1

Tarique's brother Arafat Rahman Coco have got a special permission to meet Tarique today before leaving the country, the relative said.

"We are yet to know when they will meet Tarique, but it is a special permission," he added.

The Special Branch initially refused to allow Khaleda and her family members to meet Tarique as Zobaida and her mother had just met him on April 18. However, they later got the permission from the home ministry under special consideration.

"Khaleda along with her younger son, two daughters-in-law and three grand children might fly to Saudi Arabia tomorrow [today] after meeting Tarique Rahman," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Meanwhile, another source said due to security reasons Tarique might be brought out of jail under parole for some time to arrange the meeting at a certain venue.

When asked, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) prisons Major Shamsul Haider Siddique however told The Daily Star that he did not know anything about the permission.

"If they got the permission, they would bring it to us and we will come to know about it. We do not have any scope to know about such permission before a visitor comes at the jail gate," he said last night.

He also said the jail authorities have no plan to take Tarique out of jail for the family meeting.

A source close to Khaleda's family said the former prime minister was unwilling to fly by Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

"So, the actual time of their departure depends on the availability of tickets of any other Saudi-bound plane," said the source.

Five alleged

FROM PAGE 20

Our Rangpur correspondent reports: police arrested a JMB activist Anwarul Islam, 48, raiding his house at Bara Rupai at Mornea union in Gangachara early yesterday.

Anwarul was absconding since he took away a JMB activist from police custody last year.

7 Bangladeshis

FROM PAGE 20

BSF at around 7:30pm on Wednesday from zero point near Bhomra land port on their way home with purchased cattle, BDR sources said.

The BSF, from Gohadanga camp under Basirhat thana of 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, India, tortured the seven Bangladeshis severely and later dumped them in a ditch near the zero point.

Local Bangladeshis rescued them in a critical condition and sent them to a hospital for treatment.

BSF has sent a letter to BDR authorities protesting the incident yesterday. Adjutant of 41 Rifles Battalion Nurul Momin Chowdhury confirmed the incident.

Earlier on Tuesday, the BSF from Panbari and Soladana camps under Basirhat thana of 24 Parganas entered Bangladesh territory crossing the Harodhda border through the River Ichhamati by speed boats.

The BSF then abducted four Bangladeshi cattle traders, Wahidul Islam, 21, Hafizul Islam, 22, and Saiful Islam, 26, from Harodhda village in Sadaq upazila. Identity of the fourth Bangladeshi was not available.

The Indian border guards tortured the four Bangladeshis so severely that the four had to be admitted to Basirhat Hospital in India, relatives of the victims said.

Lt Col Asif Abdur Rouf, commanding officer of 41 Rifles Battalion, confirmed the incident.

He hoped that the situation would be under control very soon, but could not specify any timeline.

"Once we are able to kill the third well, we will take care of other faults in the gas field," he said.

The Indian border guards tortured the four Bangladeshis so severely that the four had to be admitted to Basirhat Hospital in India, relatives of the victims said.

Lt Col Asif Abdur Rouf, commanding officer of 41 Rifles Battalion, confirmed the incident.

Asked where the political parties and candidates would paste their posters, the EC secretary said they would innovate some ideas. He, however, said any city corporation or municipality might specify places

UNSC team to hold Kosovo talks next week

AFP, United Nations

A Security Council mission will visit Belgrade and Pristina next week to discuss the UN plan for the supervised independence of the breakaway Serbian province of Kosovo, Britain's UN envoy said yesterday.

In Belgrade, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Thursday that any attempts to unilaterally recognize the independence of Kosovo could destabilize Serbia and the Balkan region.

"I expect the fact-finding mission of the Security Council to be in Belgrade on Thursday (April 26) and in Pristina on Friday," Emry Jones Parry told reporters.

Jones Parry, who chairs the 15-member council for this month, said the mission, which was requested by Russia, would stop over in Brussels for briefings by the European Union and NATO on his way to Belgrade.

UN officials said Belgian Ambassador Johan Verbeke would lead the council mission.

Last week, Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin said the mission would take stock of the situation on the ground and conduct a "comprehensive review of implementation" of Council Resolution 1244 on Kosovo's future status.

Security Council 1244, adopted in 1999, authorizes the United Nations to facilitate a political process to determine the future status of Kosovo, a Serbian province with a predominantly ethnic Albanian population.

In Belgrade, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Thursday that any attempts to unilaterally recognize the independence of Kosovo could destabilize Serbia and the Balkan region.

"I expect the fact-finding mission of the Security Council to be in Belgrade on Thursday (April 26) and in Pristina on Friday," Emry Jones Parry told reporters.

Jones Parry, who chairs the 15-member council for this month, said the mission, which was requested by Russia, would stop over in Brussels for briefings by the European Union and NATO on his way to Belgrade.

UN officials said Belgian Ambassador Johan Verbeke would lead the council mission.

Last week, Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin said the mission would take stock of the situation on the ground and conduct a "comprehensive review of implementation" of Council Resolution 1244 on Kosovo's future status.

Security Council 1244, adopted in 1999, authorizes the United Nations to facilitate a political process to determine the future status of Kosovo, a Serbian province with a predominantly ethnic Albanian population.

In Belgrade, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Thursday that any attempts to unilaterally recognize the independence of Kosovo could destabilize Serbia and the Balkan region.

"I expect the fact-finding mission of the Security Council to be in Belgrade on Thursday (April 26) and in Pristina on Friday," Emry Jones Parry told reporters.

Jones Parry, who chairs the 15-member council for this month, said the mission, which was requested by Russia, would stop over in Brussels for briefings by the European Union and NATO on his way to Belgrade.

UN officials said Belgian Ambassador Johan Verbeke would lead the council mission.

Last week, Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin said the mission would take stock of the situation on the ground and conduct a "comprehensive review of implementation" of Council Resolution 1244 on Kosovo's future status.

Security Council 1244, adopted in 1999, authorizes the United Nations to facilitate a political process to determine the future status of Kosovo, a Serbian province with a predominantly ethnic Albanian population.

In Belgrade, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Thursday that any attempts to unilaterally recognize the independence of Kosovo could destabilize Serbia and the Balkan region.

"I expect the fact-finding mission of the Security Council to be in Belgrade on Thursday (April 26) and in Prist