

India test fires cruise missile

AFP, Bhubaneswar

India yesterday successfully tested a surface-to-surface version of the supersonic BrahMos cruise missile developed jointly with Russia, official sources said.

"Sunday's test was just routine. A user trial," a defence official told AFP on condition of anonymity. The missile was last successfully tested on February 4.

The missile was fired from a mobile launcher from the Integrated Test Range at Chandipur-on-sea, 200km northeast of eastern Orissa state capital Bhubaneswar, official sources said.

First tested in June 2001, the missile named after India's Brahmaputra River and Russia's Moskva River has a range of 290km and can carry a 300-kilogram (660 pound) conventional warhead.

The eight-metre (26-foot) missile weighs about three metric tonnes and can be launched from land, ships, submarines or aircraft, travelling at a speed of up to Mach 2.8.

Sunday's test came just 10 days after India successfully tested the Agni-III, an intermediate-range missile that for the first time gives New Delhi a device capable of hitting targets inside China, including capital Beijing.

High turnout in French election

AFP, Paris

French voters packed polling stations yesterday to take part in one of the most unpredictable presidential election in decades, with millions still agonising over which candidate to back.

A dozen contenders are jostling to be the man or woman who will satisfy the country's burning desire for change, and by midday, 31 percent of voters had turned out, far more than in 2002 when anti-immigrant Jean-Marie Le Pen shocked the world by qualifying for the run-off ballot.

Rightwinger Nicolas Sarkozy and socialist Segolene Royal were favourites to make it through to the second round on May 6, but the estimated 30 percent of undecided voters left all the rival campaigns on edge.

Centrist candidate Francois Bayrou and former paratrooper Le Pen were still hopeful of a second round spot.

"Anything can happen!" declared the front-page headline of Le

Parisien, while the Journal du Dimanche said: "Incredible suspense for an historic vote." Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant, has pushed a right-wing programme based on the themes of work and national identity. But his tough talk sparked fears he would divide rather than unite the nation.

Royal, an army officer's daughter with an almost permanent smile, has presented herself as a nurturing mother figure and has proposed a leftist economic programme that would keep France's generous welfare system intact.

Bayrou, a former Latin teacher, wants to end the left-right political divide by forming a national unity government.

All three come from a new generation of politicians, and in a campaign that has been as much about personalities as policies, all claimed to represent a break from a discredited past.

Whoever wins the presidency will have to deal with a huge public debt, stubbornly high unemployment and seething discontent in the

high-immigration suburbs, which in 2005 broke out into widespread rioting.

He or she will also need to soothe French angst about factories closing and shifting to China or India.

Around 44.5 million registered voters -- an increase of 3.4 million on 2002 -- were choosing a successor to Jacques Chirac, 74, who steps down next month after leading the country for 12 years. Chirac voted late Sunday morning in his Correze constituency in central France.

In Argenteuil, one of the poor, high-immigration Paris suburbs where former interior minister Sarkozy is a hate figure for many after denouncing "rabble" troublemakers, 40-year-old Samir said he had just voted for Royal.

"Madame Royal will bring in more work, more liberty. Under Sarkozy, people were pushed and pushed, they had no freedom," said Samir, who did not want to give his surname, as he emerged into bright spring sunshine from the polling station set up in a gymnasium.

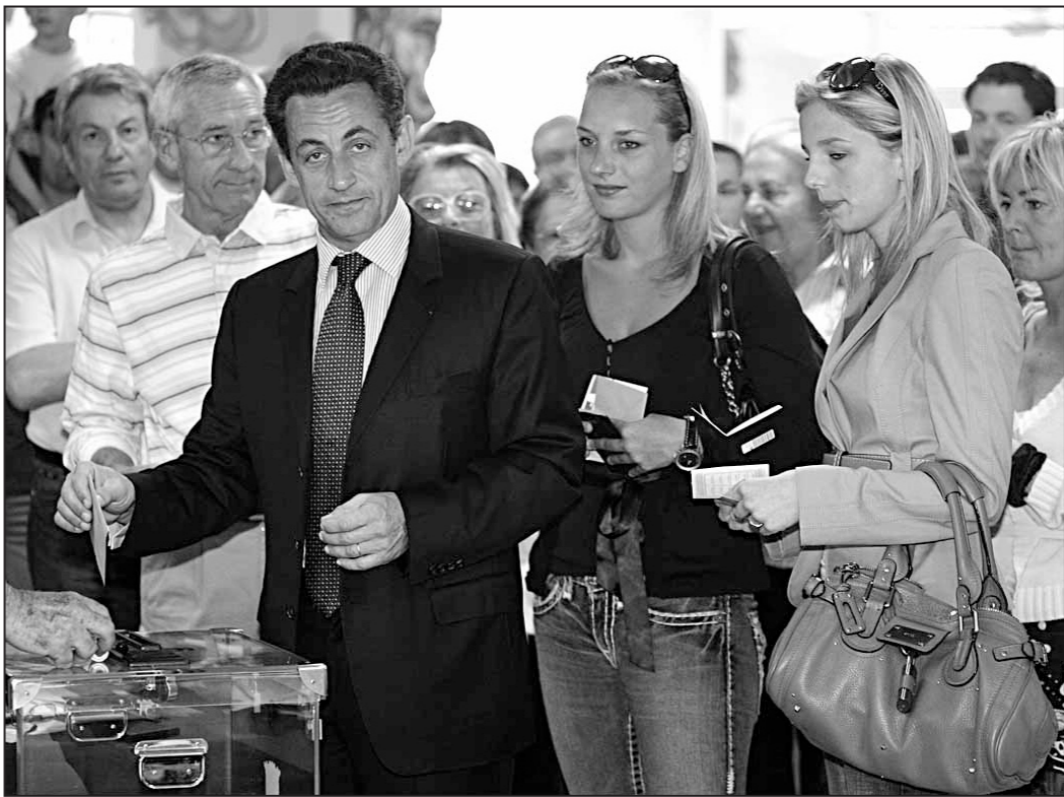


PHOTO: AFP

French right-wing UMP presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy (C), flanked by his stepdaughter Jeanne-Marie (3rdR) and his daughter Judith (2ndR), casts his ballot at a polling station at the Ile-de-la-Jatte in Neuilly-sur-Seine, near Paris yesterday. Some 44.5 million eligible voters are choosing a successor to Jacques Chirac who is stepping down after 12 years in office as twelve candidates are running for the first round of French presidential election.



PHOTO: AFP

Mourners gather Saturday at Fairview Cemetery in Narrows, Virginia, for the burial of Jarrett Lee Lane, one of 32 shooting victims of the Virginia Tech University massacre. South Korean-born Cho Seung-Hui killed 32 people at the university on April 16 before shooting himself.

S Korea to send food aid to North

AP, Seoul

South Korea agreed Sunday to send 400,000 tons of rice to impoverished North Korea despite the communist government's failure to meet a deadline to shut down its nuclear reactor.

The agreement was reached early Sunday after five days of economic aid talks in the North Korean capital. It was seen as a setback in South Korea's attempt to use food aid as leverage to pressure the North to honour its pledge to shut down the reactor under the Feb. 13 nuclear disarmament deal with the US and its regional partners.

The first batch of rice will be sent in late May, the agreement said. The South will ship 350,000 tons, and the remaining 50,000 tons be driven over land, across the world's most heavily fortified border. There were no conditions attached to the aid delivery, according to the text of the agreement.

However, South Korea's chief delegate, Chin Dong-soo, later stressed that the rice shipments were contingent on whether North Korea makes a move to

implement the disarmament deal.

Seoul told Pyongyang the rice shipments "cannot proceed as agreed upon without a condition that the North sincerely implements the (February) agreement, that we would have to link the timing and speed of rice aid shipments," Chin told reporters in Pyongyang, according to pool reports.

The Koreans also agreed Sunday to test a railway service to run on rebuilt rail tracks across their shared border. The North promised its military would guarantee the safety of travellers during the rail tests on May 17.

Last year, the North unilaterally called off a similar planned test run, citing objections from its military.

Despite the North's record of cancelling the plan, "the possibility that it will be held is higher than ever," Chin said.

The two sides also agreed that South Korea would send raw materials for making clothes, shoes and soap to the North. In exchange, the South would have the right to develop mineral resources in the North.

Orphanage fire kills 5 babies in Bosnian

AP, Sarajevo

A fast-moving fire tore through an orphanage in Bosnia's capital early yesterday, killing five babies and injuring 17 others and a nurse, police and hospital officials said.

The blaze broke out on the third floor of the Ljubica Ivezić orphanage in downtown Sarajevo around 6 a.m. and rapidly spread to three rooms where the babies were sleeping, according to the Sarajevo fire brigade.

Three boys and two girls were killed, and 17 other babies were injured, two of them critically. A nurse trying to save the children was also injured, suffering burns to her hands and face, said Dubravko Champara of the Sarajevo prosecutor's office.

Charred cradles, baby beds and teddy bears were scattered around the three gutted rooms, and smoke continued to drift through corridors hours after the fire.

Shocked neighbours stood in front of the orphanage as water from fire hoses gushed down the smouldering building's walls and stairs.

"These children have such bad luck; first they are orphaned and now as babies they die in fire," said one woman, still in her nightgown, who identified herself only as Munira.

42 civilians killed in Mogadishu fighting

AFP, Mogadishu

Clashes between Ethiopian troops and Islamist insurgents here yesterday left at least 42 civilians dead, and brought the death toll to 210 from five days of fighting, a rights group said.

"We have collected the bodies of 42 civilians who were killed today. Some 62 other wounded people were taken to hospital," said Sudan Ali Ahmed, chairman of the Elman Peace and Human Rights Organisation.

Ahmed group collates figures from hospitals, other humanitarian groups and counting bodies abandoned in the streets of the Somali capital.

Mutilated bodies lay rotting in the streets as shooting barred residents from collecting them for burial in line with Muslim traditions.

"Bodies are lying rotting in areas we cannot access," Ahmed said.

The group appealed to both sides to halt hostilities so that civilians still trapped and others escaping to the outskirts of the

city could be helped.

"We are appealing to both sides to stop the fighting. This is unacceptable the civilians are bearing the brunt," he added.

The UN refugee agency said more than 321,000 people have fled Mogadishu since February 1. Many are camped under trees and makeshift hovels in the city's outskirts, without supplies and where disease outbreaks have been reported.

On Sunday, hundreds of terrified civilians continued filing out of the blood-soaked capital, as the artillery duels showed no sign of let up.

Prospects for a ceasefire were shattered last week after the Ethiopian forces refused to meet elders from Mogadishu's dominant Hawiye clan until commanders of the insurgency would be present.

But the elders blamed the Ethiopians of planning to fight until they wipe out the insurgency and create a secure environment for the embattled government.

6 rebels killed in Lankan clashes

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels and government forces fought two gunbattles in Sri Lanka's restive north and east leaving at least six rebels killed, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Gunmen of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) clashed with troops at Vavuniya, 260 kilometres (160 miles) north of Colombo, on Saturday drawing fire from security forces, the ministry said.

It said five Tiger rebels were killed in the confrontation but did not say if troops suffered any casualties.

In a similar clash in the eastern district of Ampara, a Tiger rebel was shot dead by Special Task Force police commandos on Saturday, the ministry said.

There was no immediate reaction from the Tigers, who have been fighting for an independent homeland for minority Tamils from the majority Sinhalese island.

More than 4,000 people have been killed since December 2005 in a new wave of fighting despite a truce in place since February 2002. The conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

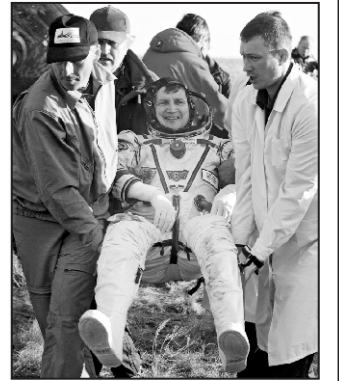


PHOTO: AFP

Russian search and recover personnel carry US Space tourist Charles Simonyi shortly after the landing of Russian Soyuz TMA-9 space capsule in Steppe about 500km south-west from Kazakh town of Karaganda on Saturday.

US billionaire returns from space trip

AP, Karaloyov

An American billionaire who won a junior cosmonaut contest as a child returned Saturday from a dream voyage to the international space station, riding a Russian capsule to a soft landing on the Kazakh steppe.

Charles Simonyi, a 58-year-old native of Hungary who helped design Microsoft Word and Excel, smiled and chatted with rescuers who helped him gingerly out of the Soyuz capsule and appeared energised by his \$25 million, two-week trip.