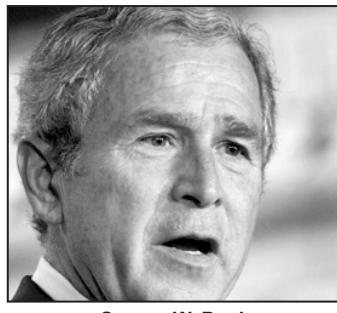


Bush, Abe to hold summit today

AFP, Washington



George W. Bush



Shinzo Abe

US President George W. Bush will welcome Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe today for talks on North Korea, Iraq, and Tokyo's increasingly assertive global role.

US officials hope that the leaders will build on a strategic relationship that blossomed and grew under Abe's predecessor Junichiro Koizumi, who was one of Bush's closest international allies and staunchest backers of war in Iraq.

The US-Japan alliance "continues to mature under Abe and remains a critical factor in the global equation," said White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

Pointing to Japan's involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, diplomacy towards North Korea, and role as the second-largest UN contributor, Johndroe added: "We encourage Japan's engagement on these and other fronts."

But experts say the prime minister, who will meet with Bush at the White House and the Camp David presidential retreat, also seeks reassurance on efforts to convince North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program.

Abe, making his first US visit as prime minister, said recently that he

would press Bush on the emotional issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea.

Japan has refused to fund an international deal to supply North Korea with energy in exchange for its nuclear disarmament unless there is progress on the abduction issue.

Since 2003, Washington has tied the abduction issue to its decision to list Pyongyang among the state sponsors of terrorism and Bush has stood strongly with Japan in that dispute.

But "in negotiations with North Korea recently, the US has said it wants to lift the sanctions on North Korea for terrorism, and Abe wants to make sure that there won't be a de-linking," said Mike Green, a

former top Bush adviser on Asia now with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

"Tokyo is worried that we're perhaps too eager for a resolution," and they "have not heard the same kind of unequivocal support we gave them in the past," so Abe wants to be sure "that we're still with them," said Green.

Bush and Abe -- who met in February in Tokyo with Vice President Dick Cheney -- will use their talks as "an opportunity to showcase our strong alliance with Japan, based on common values and close cooperation on many global and regional issues," said Johndroe.

Delhi urged to cut Kashmir troops

AFP, Srinagar

India should cut its military presence in revolt-hit Kashmir and allow state police to fight the Islamic separatist insurgency, a leading regional politician said yesterday.

The move is "imperative" to end alienation among the Himalayan state's 10 million population and achieve normalisation of the region, Mehbooba Mufti, president of the reformist Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), said.

"I have urged Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to take immediate steps towards reducing the number of troops," said Mufti in a statement.

She said she made the request to Singh during a conference of Kashmiri politicians in New Delhi on Tuesday urging him to cut troops in a phased manner in the state where rebels have been fighting New Delhi's rule for 17 years.

"Now the political and civil society institutions must be allowed to take full charge of consolidating the normalisation process," said Mufti, whose party is the junior ruling coalition partner in Kashmir.

India announced late last month it would set up an expert panel headed by the defence secretary to "determine whether there is a need to relocate and reconfigure security forces" in Kashmir.

The promise defused a threat by Mufti's father, Mufti Mohammad Syed who leads the PDP, to pull his party out from the state government if some of the estimated half million troops were not withdrawn from the region.

Naina, widow of Boris Yeltsin gives a farewell kiss to the Russian ex-President during a farewell ceremony inside Christ the Saviour Cathedral Moscow yesterday. Russians yesterday bade final farewell to Yeltsin who brought down the Soviet Union.



PHOTO: AFP

Bomb found in Bhutan, anti-royals blamed

AFP, Guwahati

Security has been stepped up in the remote Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan following the discovery of a bomb believed to have been planted by anti-royal rebels, officials said yesterday.

A Royal Bhutan Police official said the device was defused on Monday near a bridge in Phuentsholing, about 180 kilometres south of the capital Thimphu and close to the border with India.

"Security has been intensified and we are trying to zero in on the people responsible for planting the improvised explosive device," a senior police official told AFP by telephone from Phuentsholing.

He said the Bhutan Tiger Force (BTF) -- the armed militant wing of the exiled Bhutan Communist Party -- and the previously unknown Bhutan Revolutionary Youth (BRY) claimed responsibility for planting the device.

"There was a handwritten note near the bomb that mentioned the two organisations," said the police official, who asked not to be named.

"The BTF is out to create trouble inside Bhutan and this is the second time such a thing has happened," he added, saying a similar device had been discovered last month in the same area.

3 killed in Pak sectarian shooting

AFP, Dera Ismail Khan

Sunni Muslim militants shot dead three people yesterday in a targeted sectarian shooting in northwest Pakistan, police and officials said.

The assailants sprayed bullets from a Kalashnikov rifle on a vehicle in which two brothers from a prominent Shiite Muslim family and their Sunni employee were traveling in Dera Ismail Khan district.

All three died instantly and the attackers fled, police said.

"The victims were returning after spraying their crops with insecticide," district police chief Zulfiqar Cheema told AFP. "It was a targeted killing" by Sunni militants, Cheema said.

An official of the provincial government, Allama Ramzan Tauqer, blamed the attack on banned Sunni extremist outfit Sipah-e-Sabah and urged Shiite community members to remain peaceful.

Stephen Hawking to try weightlessness today

AFP, Miami

Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, who has spent his career pondering the nature of gravity from a wheelchair, is set to experience weightlessness during a "vomit comet" flight in Florida today.

The idea is to give "the world's expert on gravity the opportunity to experience zero gravity" said Peter Diamandis the chief executive of the Zero Gravity Corporation that flies the thrill ride.

Hawking, 65, the British author of the blockbuster "A Brief History of Time," will be surrounded by a medical team on the padded plane as it flies a roller-coaster trajectory to produce periods of weightlessness.

The Cambridge professor, who is almost entirely paralyzed, hopes his brief, weightless

escape from his wheelchair will eventually lead to a 2009 voyage into outer space.

Hawking will get a free ride, according to the private company that usually charges thrill-seekers \$3,500 for a spin on G-Force One, also known as the vomit comet.

The flight on a modified 35-passenger Boeing 727-200 will take off and land at NASA's space shuttle landing facility at Kennedy Space Center, near Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Specially trained pilots will take the plane up at a 45-degree angle to about 10,000 meters (33,000 feet) before plunging to 2,500 meters (8,000 feet) to give the passengers about 30 seconds of gravity-free flying.

The aircraft usually undertakes these maneuvers a dozen times,

providing a total of about five minutes in different levels of diminished gravity -- that of Mars, one-third the gravity of Earth; of the moon, with one-sixth Earth's gravity, and then the zero-gravity level of space.

"As someone who has studied gravity and black holes all of my life, I am excited to experience, first-hand, weightlessness and a zero-gravity environment," Hawking said in a statement when he initially announced his intention to take the flight.

The commercial flights, which typically last 90 minutes, are similar to those the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has conducted for 40 years to train astronauts.

Zero G says the weightlessness experienced inside the plane is similar to a free fall in sky diving.

Woman wearing burqa denied bus trip

AFP, Stockholm

A burqa-clad woman in Sweden was refused passage on a city bus in the town of Malmoe, allegedly because the driver said he could not identify the woman, media reported yesterday.

"I have never had to identify myself on a public bus before. Wearing a burqa is my personal choice and it doesn't make me more threatening than anyone else," the woman, whose name was not disclosed, told Swedish free daily Metro.

The woman boarded the bus despite the driver's attempt to refuse her access, but said she still had to endure mockery from him. She has reported the incident to police.

AFP, Quito

Ecuador descended into political crisis in a power struggle over its leftist president's reform drive, as demonstrators hit the streets and dissenting opposition deputies fled abroad from charges of treason.

In a conflict dividing both the legislature and the judiciary, a prosecutor Tuesday ordered the arrest of 24 deputies, nearly half of the 50 who the country's highest court had ordered reinstated to Congress.

Outside the Congress, some 400 pro-government protesters rallied against the expelled legislators, with police firing tear gas in sporadic confrontations.

"The entire country is near war," said leftist party leader Gustavo Ramirez.

The right-wing opposition depu-

ties were sacked in March over their refusal to go along with far-reaching constitutional reforms promoted by President Rafael Correa.

The 24 lawmakers are accused of plotting against the state. They were initially fired for allegedly interfering with a national referendum to allow Correa to pursue his aim of rewriting the constitution.

Eleven of them fled to Bogota late Tuesday and asked for political asylum. Ecuadorian opposition congresswoman Gloria Gallardo told the radio station RCN, adding that four more were on the way to Colombia.

"We have come to Colombia, which is a sister-country, to ask for protection and political asylum," said Gallardo, who arrived on a flight from Quito together with 10 other deputies from the right-wing

PRIAN party.

According to prosecutor Elsa Moreno, the deputies were suspected of sedition for "rising against the government, refusing to recognize the constitution, and impeding a meeting of the Congress."

The accusation followed Congress's dismissal of another group of officials, the country's nine Constitutional Tribunal justices, after these judges reinstated the 50 lawmakers who had opposed Correa's constitutional reforms.

The 50 were dismissed on March 7 for rejecting a court decision backing the referendum, which if approved would allow the setting up of a body to handle the proposed constitutional changes.

Intelligence has nothing to do with wealth: Study

AFP, Washington

Intelligence has nothing to do with wealth, according to a US study published Tuesday which found that people with below average smarts were just as wealthy as those with higher IQ scores.

"People don't become rich because they are smart," said Jay Zagorsky, research scientist at Ohio State University whose study appears in the Journal of Intelligence.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics survey included 7,403 Americans who have been interviewed repeatedly since 1979. Based on 2004 answers, people who are now in their mid-40s showed no link between brain- and earning-power.

"Your IQ has really no relationship to your wealth. And being very smart does not protect you from getting into financial difficulty,"

Zagorsky said. The study confirmed previous research which has shown that smarter people tend to earn more money, but pointed out there is a difference between high pay and overall wealth.

"The average income difference between a person with an IQ score in the normal range (100) and someone in the top two percent of society (130) is currently between 6,000 and 18,500 dollars per year," it said.

"But when it came to total wealth and the likelihood of financial difficulties, people of below average and average intelligence did just fine when compared to the super-intelligent."

An irregular pattern of total wealth as well as financial distress levels -- such as maxed out credit cards, bankruptcy and missing bill payments -- emerged among the various degrees of intelligence, the study said.