

N Korea disarmament, talks back on track

IAEA inspectors set to return next week, says US

AFP, Tokyo

A US envoy said yesterday that North Korea's nuclear disarmament is finally back on track, with UN inspectors set to return next week and six-nation negotiations seen resuming in early July.

North Korea had refused to implement a breakthrough February deal to shut its nuclear reactor due to a long-running feud over its assets frozen in the Chinese territory of Macau.

With the funds finally returned, North Korea has invited inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog, to the country to seal its Yongbyon reactor.

Christopher Hill, the US pointman on North Korea, said that the IAEA team was expected to return next Tuesday and that six-nation talks on the next stage of disarmament would likely resume in early July.

"I would think it would be early July," Hill said of the next talks.

"I'd rather not on the Fourth of July, but I would like it immediately after," he said, referring to the US Independence Day holiday. "We have a lot of work to do and very little time to do it."

North Korea threw out IAEA inspectors in December 2002 amid an escalating crisis with the United States. The communist state tested an atom bomb last year.

Amid the resolution of the banking row, North Korea on Tuesday tested its third short-range missile in a month, according to South Korea's military. But Hill said the test was routine and "not a political or diplomatic act."

In the six-nation February deal with the US, Russia, Japan, China and South Korea, Pyongyang promised to shut down its Yongbyon reactor, the source of raw material for bomb-making plutonium, in return for badly needed fuel oil.

But it refused to comply with the April deadline until it received the frozen assets. In a complex deal, the United States said the cash finally returned Tuesday to North Korean hands via a bank in Russia.

There were "no bumps in the road right now, but I'm sure there will be in the future," Hill said.

"It's going to be a very long process. We're going to have problems. We're going to have to get through the problems," he said. "And we'll have a couple of good days and a couple of bad days and just continue like that."

China, the host of the talks and main ally of North Korea -- officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea -- welcomed Pyongyang's decision to allow the inspectors to return.

"We believe the move shows the DPRK's political will to implement the February 13 joint document," foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang told reporters Tuesday.

In the second phase of the February deal, the North is supposed to declare and permanently disable all its nuclear programmes.

Hill said he wanted the six-nation talks to take place after the first stage of shutting down the reactor was complete.

"We have to somehow schedule (the talks) in a way that we will be talking about the next phase and not about the first phase," Hill said.

He hoped the talks would pave the way for a six-way meeting of foreign ministers, possibly on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in the Philippines on August 2.

Lanka says 197 rebels killed in battle for east

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan army said yesterday that two months of fighting aimed at ousting Tamil Tiger rebels from jungles in the east of the island has left 197 dead, the vast majority of them guerrillas.

The island's security forces have been trying to remove pockets of rebels from the Thoppigala jungles and areas near the eastern town of Batticaloa, with strategists hoping the Tigers would then be confined to the north.

"In the operation to capture Thoppigala since April, 188 Tigers have been killed and 133 wounded," said army spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe. "Security forces suffered nine killed and 78 wounded."

No independent confirmation of the casualty figures were available, and there was no immediate comment from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both sides, however, routinely inflate enemy casualty figures.

Samarasinghe said the LTTE base in the jungles near Batticaloa would be under government control "in the next few days."

"With the capture of Thoppigala we would eliminate their control over the local population and prevent the conscription of child soldiers," Samarasinghe said. "This is a big setback for the Tigers in the east."

He claimed government troops had found the bodies of 30 rebels following fighting in the region Tuesday, and said clearing operations were under way to eliminate an estimated 150 rebels still holed up in the jungles.

The military statement came a day after a clash between naval craft and a flotilla of Tiger boats in the north of the island.



Relatives grieve as 25-year-old Ibrahim Abed is taken for burial in the northern West Bank village of Kfar Dan, near the city of Jenin, yesterday. Two militants--Ziad Malaysheh, 25, from the Islamic Jihad and Ibrahim Abed from an armed group linked to Fatah were killed when they clashed with a unit that came to arrest them near Jenin.

Abbas cabinet a chance for Palestinian state

Say Bush, Olmert

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert Tuesday voiced strong support for Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, hoping he and his new moderate cabinet could pave the way towards renewed talks on creating a Palestinian state.

"Our hope is that president Abbas and the prime minister (Salam) Fayyad will be strengthened to the point where they can lead the Palestinians in a different direction with a different hope," said Bush.

Abbas on Sunday expelled Hamas from the Palestinian unity government and appointed an emergency cabinet after the radical Islamists seized full control of the Gaza Strip in bloody battles which left over 110 people dead.

Ahead of two hours of one-on-one talks, Bush and Olmert sought to bolster Abbas's position, whose move has encountered some Palestinian criticism, with both leaders affirming "he is the president of all the Palestinian people."

"I want to strengthen the moderates and cooperate with president Abbas," said Olmert, who met Bush for the third time in just over a year.

The two leaders said the new cabinet was a chance for renewing the stalled talks between Israel and the Palestinians based on Bush's 2002 vision for a two-state solution to Middle East peace.

"We share a common vision of two states living side-by-side in peace," Bush said at the White House. He nevertheless refused to set out a clear timeframe for the creation of a Palestinian state.

His proposals for two states based on the internationally-backed "road map" to peace have failed to materialize since talks broke down in 2000.

"I am going to make every possible effort to move forward to see how things can be worked jointly, in order to provide Palestinians a real, genuine chance for a state of their own," added Olmert.



AFP file photo shows a Libyan security guard stands in front of the caged foreign defendants during their retrial at a court in Tripoli last year.

Death row medics launch last-ditch appeal in Libya

AFP, Tripoli

Six foreign medics sentenced to death for infecting Libyan children with the AIDS virus launched their final appeal yesterday, after more than eight years behind bars for a crime they say they did not commit.

As the hearing opened, relatives of the victims rallied outside the Tripoli courtroom, holding up pictures of their infected children, many of whom have died.

Libya's supreme court is expected to uphold the death penalty against the five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor, but the verdict is expected to pave the way for a compensation package and for the sentences to be commuted.

However, a verdict was not expected on Wednesday.

Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi's son, Seif al-Islam, has said he expected compensation for the infected childrens' families to be worked out between the Bulgarian government and the European Union.

"Immediately after the verdict, we will begin to work... on a package (of measures) with a view to a solution," Islam told Italy's Corriere della Sera newspaper.

Libyan sources close to the case said provided the package was agreed, a final decision on the medics' fate could be reached by the end of the week.

Libya's highest court has the authority to commute the death sentences to prison terms that could be served in Bulgaria which has an extradition treaty with Tripoli, a Libyan lawyer explained on condition of anonymity.

The medics were first arrested in February 1999 and were sentenced to death in May 2004 after being convicted of infecting 438 children with HIV-tainted blood at a hospital in the Mediterranean city of Benghazi.

Fifty-six children have since died.

The accused have denied the charges and foreign health experts have said the AIDS epidemic in Benghazi, Libya's second city, was probably the result of poor hygiene.

The case has sparked mounting criticism from the European Union and the United States and hindered Libya's efforts at rapprochement with the West after Kadhafi's regime renounced efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction in December 2003.

US President George W. Bush appealed for the release of the medics last week during a visit to Bulgaria. "We will continue to make clear to Libya that the release of these nurses is a higher priority" for Bulgaria, Bush said.

A date for the final appeal hearing was only decided after senior EU diplomats including External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner visited Libya earlier this month.

Britain's oldest MP, India-born Piara Khabra passes away

AFP, London

Indian-born Piara Khabra, who was Britain's oldest member of parliament, has died at the age of 82, his parliamentary research announced yesterday.

Khabra, from the Punjab in India, had been undergoing treatment for liver problems at Hammersmith Hospital in west London.

A member of parliament's lower House of Commons in the governing Labour Party, he represented Ealing Southall, a west London constituency with a large South Asian population.

Khabra came to Britain in the 1950s and became one of a small number of people of South Asian origin to have made it into parliament when he was first elected in 1992.

He had previously served in the Indian army and worked as a teacher before becoming involved in Southall community politics through the Indian Workers Association.

"Piara Khabra was a remarkable servant of the people, devoting his life to helping his constituents and providing service to the community," said his parliamentary research Julian Bell.

"At an age when most people had long since retired he was still energetically tackling individual and constituency problems. His service and political wisdom will be sadly missed."

Rushdie knighthood sparks diplomatic furore

AFP, Islamabad

Controversy over a knighthood for author Salman Rushdie escalated into a full-blown diplomatic row as Iran and Pakistan summoned Britain's ambassadors to protest, drawing a retort from London.

Iran summoned the British envoy to Tehran, Geoffrey Adams, who was told by the foreign ministry's director for Europe that the honour was a "provocative act," state media reported.

In Pakistan, where both houses of parliament called on Britain to withdraw the knighthood, Britain's high commissioner Robert Brinkley was also summoned to the foreign ministry.

Islamic hardliners in the eastern city of Lahore burned an effigy of Queen Elizabeth, while one Iranian newspaper branded her an "old crone."

Britain in response said Brinkley had passed on London's "deep concern" at comments by Pakistan's religious affairs minister Ijaz-ul-Haq that honouring Rushdie justified suicide attacks.

"The British government is very clear that nothing can justify suicide bomb attacks," a Foreign Office spokesman told AFP.

Rushdie is accused by some Muslims of blaspheming Islam in his novel "The Satanic Verses," whose publication in 1988 triggered an international furore.



Salman Rushdie

He has been living since then under the shadow of a death sentence imposed by Iran's late supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini which has never been formally revoked.

Rushdie, who turned 60 Tuesday and has won several top literary awards, was put under police protection following the Satanic Verses flare-up. His exact whereabouts now are not known, but he is believed to divide his time between London and New York. His knighthood for services to literature, which was announced Saturday in the queen's traditional birthday honours list, means he can call himself Sir Salman.

The Iranian foreign ministry official, Ebrahim Rahimpour, told Adams that Britain's "insulting, suspicious and ill-considered act is an obvious sign of Islamophobia which has terribly hurt the feelings of 1.5 billion Muslims."

"The consequences of this provocation, which has angered Muslims, will be directed at the British queen and government."

Pakistan, for its part, said that it "deplores and regrets the decision by the British government" which showed a "lack of sensitivity."

Brinkley, the envoy in Pakistan, defended the award, saying it was "simply untrue that this knighthood is intended as an insult to Islam or the Prophet Mohammed."

Afghanistan's insurgent Taliban condemned Britain's action in a statement read to AFP over the telephone by spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi.

"This is a clear enmity with Islam and Muslims. We ask Britain to take back what they have done and to apologise to Muslims," he said.

There was no reaction from the Afghan government.

In London, Buckingham Palace declined comment, as did Rushdie's publisher Jonathan Cape, a division of Random House.

Thailand calls poll for Nov

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday announced it would hold general elections on November 25 in a bid to speed up the return to democracy in the kingdom after last year's coup.

"The government wants to make elections happen faster, and the elections must be free and fair and transparent," army-appointed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont said.

The polls -- originally scheduled for December -- would be preceded by a referendum on August 19 on the new constitution, which was drafted by a body appointed by the junta that seized power last September, election commission chair Apichart Sukhaganond said.

The moves will likely appease the international community, which has been pushing for early polls, but the party of deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra said any elections would be illegitimate unless it was able to contest them.

The Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved three weeks ago over vote fraud violations, and a law has not yet been passed allowing twice-elected TRT to register a new party.

"It's good that they moved up the election, but they have to open up the opportunity to register the political parties otherwise the election will not be legitimate," said Kudub Saikrajang, a senior member of TRT.

Surayud denied that the new poll date was part of the masterplan by the junta and government to erase TRT from political life.



Supporters of Thailand's ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra wave protest flags in Bangkok. Protesters linked to the ousted premier held a demonstration yesterday demanding resignation of the junta and holding of immediate elections.

Fujimori mulls run for office in Japan

AFP, Lima

Peru's ex-president Alberto Fujimori, under arrest in Chile and facing extradition on human rights abuse charges, is considering a run for office in Japan, aides said Tuesday.

Representatives of the conservative People's New Party approached Fujimori at his Santiago, Chile residence, where he is held under house arrest, and urged him Monday to run in July elections for the upper house of Japan's Diet.

Fujimori has faced extradition to Peru on human rights charges since November 2005, when he was nabbed in Santiago before he could launch a presidential campaign in neighboring Peru.

Fujimori, president of Peru from 1990 to 2000, is a Peruvian of Japanese descent and is a Japanese citizen. He lived in exile in Tokyo for five years while he plotted a political comeback, and is legally eligible to run.

"Alberto Fujimori has reserved his final response, while considering what benefits his possible election as a senator in Japan could have for Peru," the ex-president's aides in Lima said in a statement Tuesday.

Peruvian prosecutors however want Fujimori to face a series of charges that include ordering the murders of 25 people in 1991 and 1992, ordering the abduction and torture of opponents and embez-

zling government funds.

Two weeks ago Chile's Supreme Court prosecutor recommended that the court accept Peru's request for Fujimori's extradition. The final ruling however was delayed as the Chilean judge handling the case went on sick leave.

Peruvian Foreign Minister Jose Garcia Belaunde was unimpressed with the possible candidacy. "It is a maneuver by that party and by ex-president Fujimori to try to avoid extradition ... and involve the Japanese government," he told El Comercio, Peru's leading newspaper.

For Peru "the issue is in the hands of Chilean justice," he said. "We trust them, and are convinced that they will not alter the course of events."

Fujimori's candidacy in Japan "would in no way affect the process of extradition," said Chilean lawyer Carlos Castro, an expert in the laws involving repatriation.

"For the law, he is a Peruvian citizen with charges pending in Peru," said Castro, speaking in Santiago.

His Japanese nationality has no effect on his case, said Hugo Gutierrez, a Chilean human rights specialist. He added that Fujimori's status as Peru's ex-president gives him no special privileges in Chile.