

N Korea gets ready to shut N-reactor

Says US envoy

AP, Seoul

US envoy Christopher Hill said yesterday that North Korea is prepared to promptly close down its Yongbyon nuclear reactor in line with an agreement reached earlier this year.

Hill, speaking at a press conference in Seoul following his return from the North, also said both the US and North Korea reaffirmed their commitment to the February accord aimed at North Korea's denuclearisation as well as an early meeting of chief representatives to the six-way negotiating framework.

"The talks were very detailed, very substantive and I believe they were also very useful and positive," Hill said at the joint press conference with his South Korean counterpart, Chun Yung-woo.

"The DPRK indicated that they are prepared promptly to shut down the Yongbyon facility as called for in the February agreement," Hill said.

referring to the North by the abbreviation of its official name.

Hill said the North is ready to disable the reactor, also in line with the agreement, "although we must work out the details."

While saying that North Korea's denuclearisation can be achieved, Hill also said it will take time and effort.

"I sense that we are going to be able to achieve our full objectives, that is complete denuclearisation, but also burdened by the realisation of the fact that we are going to have to spend a great deal of time, a great deal of effort, a lot of work in achieving these," Hill said.

In February, North Korea promised China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the US, the other members of the six-way talks, to shut down its main nuclear fuel processing facility at Yongbyon by mid-April.

That was delayed, however, due to a dispute over \$25 million in allegedly illicit North Korean funds

frozen in a bank in the Chinese territory of Macau.

Hill said he was invited to visit by North Korea and made no effort to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

The rare visit to Pyongyang by a high-ranking US official came amid hopes North Korea was on the verge of taking concrete steps to carry out its commitment to shut down its bomb-making nuclear reactor as pledged under a February agreement.

Despite promises by North Korea, the six-party process, which began in August 2003, has failed to achieve any concrete action by the country toward denuclearisation.

The North carried out its first nuclear test explosion in October last year.

Abbas mulls early Palestinian polls

AP, Ramallah

In his bitter wrangling with Hamas over legitimacy, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is considering calling presidential and legislative elections to strengthen his position, a top aide said Thursday.

However, elections could only be held in the West Bank while Gaza remains under Hamas rule, further deepening the split between the two territories. One Hamas spokesman hinted the Islamic militants might try to disrupt voting in the West Bank.

In Ramallah, Abbas won backing from the PLO for his most recent steps against Hamas throwing it out of the government, outlawing its militias and forming an emergency Cabinet of moderates in response to the militant group's violent takeover of Gaza.

The PLO Central Council also asked Abbas to prepare new presidential and legislative elections.

An Abbas adviser, Yasser Abed Rabbo, said the Palestinian leader "will work to conduct presidential and legislative elections in the West Bank and Gaza." Asked about holding elections in Gaza, Abed Rabbo said: "Gaza is part of the

homeland."

A poll Thursday indicated that 75 percent of Palestinians support new elections in the wake of Hamas' seizure of Gaza. Hamas came to power in January 2006 parliamentary elections, while Abbas, from Fatah, was elected separately a year earlier.

Although largely inactive in recent years, the PLO considers itself the sole representative of the Palestinian people and can bestow legitimacy or take it away. Its decision effectively sidelined the Hamas-controlled parliament, which normally would be asked to approve a new government but has been paralysed since Israel's roundup of most Hamas legislators.

Hamas is not a member of the PLO, which is dominated by Fatah. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri dismissed the PLO's decisions as "illegal and illegitimate."

Underscoring Hamas' increasing isolation, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced he will host a regional peace summit Monday with Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Jordan's King Abdullah II.



PHOTO: AFP

Abu Obeida, a spokesman for Hamas's armed wing, stands inside Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas' house in Gaza City on Thursday. Hamas' armed wing firmly denied any attempt on Mahmud Abbas' life. Abbas Thursday accused Hamas of plotting to assassinate him, in his first major speech since the Islamist movement seized control of the Gaza Strip.

EU summit locked in treaty deadlock

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders were locked in intense talks on the second day of a summit Friday seeking to break a deadlock with Britain and Poland over a new reform treaty.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the current EU president, met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in an effort to ease concerns about his country's objections.

Blair entered the European Council building on foot and, like Polish President Lech Kaczynski, ignored reporters as he strode in for the first of many bilateral meetings on the summit sidelines.

"We will exchange our views and assessments of the situation. We shall also work on the text. I can't tell you more for the moment, only that we shall continue to work hard," Merkel said.

The EU is looking for a new way to simplify decision-making after the collapse of its proposed constitution, which was rejected by French and Dutch voters in 2005.

After months of negotiations, the Germany presidency, which runs until the end of next week, distributed a new draft text of its "reform treaty" to its EU partners for the first time on Tuesday.

Mood turns against Musharraf

Pak leader's political future in doubt

AP, Islamabad

From the dusty streets of Punjab to the privileged ranks of the ruling parliamentary party, the mood in Pakistan is turning against its military leader.

President Gen Pervez Musharraf's bungled attempt to oust the country's top judge three months ago has backfired badly, fuelling a national protest movement and seriously threatening his political survival.

Even erstwhile supporters of his eight-year rule are urging the pro-US general to resign as army chief by year's end and allow a civilian-led government.

While Western governments still expect their key ally in the fight against al-Qaeda to weather the storm, and stay on as a nonmilitary president, Musharraf has yet to make his intentions plain, deepening uncertainty in the country before his current term expires in October.

With parliamentary elections also due around the year's end, disquiet is

growing among his own political base.

Prominent figures within the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Q are now openly criticising his March 9 ouster of Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry that unleashed violence in Karachi that killed more than 40 people, and canvassing a conciliatory path toward opposition parties.

"Elections should be held in a manner that is acceptable for all. He should invite all political parties for a grand national reconciliation," Syed Kabir Ali Wasti, a PML-Q vice-president, told The Associated Press. "This is how he can get another five years."

Election to the presidency is through a vote of Parliament and Pakistan's four provincial assemblies. Musharraf's stated strategy is to win a vote for a new term until 2012 from sitting lawmakers, even though they were elected in flawed polls in 2002 and their term too is nearly over.

"There's increasing agreement across the country that nobody is going to swallow it," said Ayaz Amir, a

Rushdie death Fatwa still valid Says Iran cleric

AFP, Tehran

The death sentence Fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie by Iran's revolutionary leader 18 years ago is still valid and will remain so, a leading cleric said yesterday following Britain's knighting of the controversial author.

"In Islamic Iran, the revolutionary Fatwa issued by Imam Khomeini remains valid and cannot be modified," Hojatoleslam Ahmad Khatami said during his Friday prayers sermon in Tehran.

The Indian-born novelist was forced to go into hiding for a decade after Khomeini issued the 1989 death sentence over his book "The Satanic Verses", saying it insulted Islam.

Young communists prompt fears for Nepali peace

AFP, Kathmandu

Sitaram Prasai, a rich Nepali businessman wanted by police for massive bank fraud, used to think he was above the law.

He would hobnob with Kathmandu's political elite and throw lavish parties, calm in the belief that his wealth meant he was untouchable.

But that was before the Young Communist League, a group attached to Nepal's Maoists, rolled up.

The modern day Robin Hoods – as they portray themselves – snatched Prasai earlier this month, held him overnight and then

paraded him in an open air theatre in Kathmandu before delivering him to justice.

"There is widespread corruption in the country," Ganesh Man Pun, the president of the YCL told AFP, bemoaning government inaction against crime and corruption.

"Our aim is just to help the police administration in maintaining peace, law and order."

But the YCL, which is believed to have 300,000 members, is also seen as a serious threat yet to Nepal's fragile peace process, under which the Maoists are supposed to lock up their arms and end a decade of insurgency.

Lanka court delays hearing on eviction of Tamils

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court yesterday delayed hearing a case challenging the eviction of minority ethnic Tamils from Colombo, which police said was undertaken to root out Tamil Tiger rebels.

The court set the first formal hearing for July 26, without explaining the delay, but kept a ban on security forces repeating a recent operation in which nearly 400 Tamil men, women and children were taken out of the capital by bus.

"The case was fixed for July 26, when all sides have been asked to support the issues they are canvassing," a court official said following a preliminary hearing.

Sri Lanka's government came in for heavy criticism for the operation two weeks ago, with rights groups saying the eviction of Tamils was a form of "collective punishment."

The government apologised, although police argued that Tamil

Tiger suicide bombers and assassins had been using low-budget accommodation in Colombo to plan attacks.

The Supreme Court's intervention followed a complaint by a political lobby group that the police swoop, in which hundreds of Tamils were dragged out in their night clothes and sent away by bus, was a violation of basic rights.

The owner of a low-budget guest house said that troops even ordered a kidney transplant patient to move – despite protests that his life would be in danger if he was not treated.

The legal challenge to the eviction was filed by local lobby group the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

The Tamil Tiger rebels have waged a 35-year separatist campaign for an independent homeland for minority Tamils, a conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

US terror charges against Iran are 'lies'

Says top official

AFP, Washington

Iran rejected as "lies" Thursday US allegations that it is arming Shia extremists in Iraq, and alleged that some Nato powers are supplying weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

But Iranian national security chief Ali Larijani also said the Islamic republic was open to new negotiations with the United States over restoring stability to Iraq following landmark talks last month.

"We are an oppressed power in the region, and we are not pursuing adventurism," Larijani, who is also Iran's top nuclear negotiator, said in an interview with Newsweek magazine.

The Iranian official said his Shia Islamic country was arming neither Iraqi militias nor the Sunnis Muslim Taliban in Afghanistan.

"I think the Americans have embarked on a wrong course, and these lies are going to be disclosed sooner or later," Larijani said.

In neighbouring Iraq, he said, Iran has supported the democratic government, and does not relish

the prospect of an influx of Iraqi refugees fleeing instability to join the "some 500,000" already in Iran.

Asked about charges by US military and intelligence sources that Iran is supplying Iraqi insurgents with sophisticated bombs that can pierce heavy armour, he said: "They are lying."

"Please present this information to us. For all the terrors that are happening in Iraq, is there any evidence that would show or dictate that we have been involved in it?"

On a more conciliatory note, Larijani said that Iran was willing to explore new contacts with the United States over Iraq after the two arch-foes held their first high-level direct talks in 27 years in late May.

"We are serious in this matter, and we do find it quite useful for the security of the region," he said. Asked about any Iranian preconditions to new talks, he said: "No, we are fully ready for negotiations in this matter."

Activists of Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) carry placards as they shout anti-British slogans during a protest rally in Lahore Thursday. Pakistani traders announced a reward of 10 million rupees (166,666 USD) for anyone who beheads Salman Rushdie following Britain's decision to award the novelist a knighthood.

