

IAEA, North Korea strike N-plant closure accord

AP, Pyongyang

The UN nuclear watchdog and North Korea have reached an agreement on how the country will monitor and verify shutdown of the country's main nuclear reactor, a top official said yesterday.

A team from the International Atomic Energy Agency returned Friday to the North Korean capital from a two-day trip to the Yongbyon nuclear complex, broadcaster APTN reported.

It was the first IAEA visit to the facility since UN monitors were expelled from the country in 2002.

"We have concluded this understanding, what our monitoring and verification activities are in principle," IAEA Deputy Director Olli Heinonen said in footage shot by APTN. He did not provide specifics of the agreement.

Heinonen said his team was preparing to report to the IAEA board of governors within one week, but said the timing of the shutdown was up to the six countries involved in North Korea nuclear talks.

"This is for the six parties to decide. You have to ask them the time scale. When they do (decide), we will be ready," he told APTN.

The IAEA had been invited by North Korea to discuss details of shutting down the reactor, as it pledged under an international accord in February. It was the first

IAEA trip to the facility since its monitors were expelled from the country in late 2002.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in Washington Thursday that she hoped for a swift shutdown of the country's nuclear weapons programs.

"We hope for now rapid progress given the beginning, we believe, of the North Korean efforts to meet their initial action obligations," Rice said before meeting South Korean Foreign Minister Song Min-Soon at the State Department.

North Korea agreed in February to close the reactor in exchange for economic aid and political concessions, under an accord reached in six-party talks also including the US, China, Japan, Russia and South Korea.

But the communist nation ignored an April deadline to do so because of a banking dispute with the United States.

That dispute was settled this week after months of delay and North Korea announced Monday that it would move forward with the disarmament deal. That followed a surprise visit last week to North Korea by Christopher Hill, the top US negotiator in the six-party talks.

The accord's initial phase calls for North Korea to shut the Yongbyon reactor and receive 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil.

South Korea's Unification

Ministry said Thursday it had agreed with North Korea to discuss details of the oil aid such as how much should be shipped to which ports in talks on Friday and Saturday at the North Korean border city of Kaesong.

Meanwhile, North Korea test-fired three surface-to-surface missiles that landed in the North's territorial waters, according to South Korea's Yonhap news agency and US Defense Department officials.

Yonhap said the tests came on Wednesday, but US officials said it was Tuesday. The discrepancy could not immediately be reconciled.

It was the third time in a month that North Korea test-fired a short-range missile, following launches May 25 and June 7.

The tests could increase tensions over North Korea's nuclear program, although the country is not believed capable of mounting a nuclear weapon on a missile.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe slammed the tests, calling them a provocation that defied the United Nations and could destabilise the region.

US officials in Washington also criticised the launches.

ICRC slams mass abuse in Myanmar

AFP, Geneva

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) vigorously denounced yesterday what it called widespread and systematic human rights abuses by Myanmar's military regime.

In an exceptionally strongly worded statement, ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger accused Myanmar's armed forces of forcing thousands of detainees to work as porters to the point of exhaustion and malnutrition, sometimes using them as "human minesweepers."

"The persistent use of detainees as porters for the armed forces is a matter of grave humanitarian concern," Kellenberger said.

"The actions of the authorities have also resulted in immense suffering for thousands of people in conflict-affected areas."

The ICRC insisted that it had repeatedly drawn attention to the abuses, but the authorities had failed to stop them.

Some of the porters were murdered, according to the ICRC written statement, which was based on observations and interviews by its own staff in Myanmar mainly between 2000 and 2005.

At a briefing with journalists, Kellenberger called the forced portering "particularly repulsive".

"In minefields they have to go ahead, so they are types of human minesweepers," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

A partially submerged mosque sits in floodwaters in Pakistan's cyclone-hit coastal town of Turbat, some 550km southwest of Quetta yesterday. Military helicopters led efforts to help 800,000 Pakistanis affected by a powerful cyclone as floods claimed the lives of more than 50 people in neighbouring Afghanistan. Nearly 450 people have now lost their lives in severe pre-monsoon weather, which has swept across South Asia in the past week, which the United Nations said highlighted the need to prepare for the impact of global warming.



PHOTO: AFP

Police forensic officers load a Mercedes car in which police said contained a "potentially viable explosive device" onto a lorry in Haymarket in central London yesterday. Scotland Yard said they were called to the Haymarket, near the Piccadilly Circus landmark and the British capital's main theatre district, just before 2:00 am (0100 GMT) after reports that a car was parked suspiciously.

Bush won't supply subpoenaed documents

AP, Washington

President Bush, in a constitutional showdown with Congress, claimed executive privilege Thursday and rejected demands for White House documents and testimony about the firing of US attorneys.

His decision was denounced as "Nixonian stonewalling" by the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Bush rejected subpoenas for documents from former presidential counsel Harriet Miers and former political director Sara Taylor. The White House made clear neither one would testify next month, as directed by the subpoenas.

Presidential counsel Fred Fielding said Bush had made a reasonable attempt at compromise but Congress forced the confrontation by issuing subpoenas. "With respect, it is with much regret that we are forced down this unfortunate path which we sought to avoid by finding grounds for mutual accommodation."

UN chief holds talks with Karzai in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon made a fleeting visit to Afghanistan yesterday for talks with President Hamid Karzai and leaders of the Nato-led force helping to fight a Taliban insurgency.

Ban shook hands with Karzai for photographers before going into talks in the presidential palace soon after his arrival.

"He is really talking to the president about how to ensure UN coordination with the government of Afghanistan," UN spokesman Adrian Edwards told AFP.

The men are also due to meet in Rome on Tuesday at an international conference on rule of law and human rights in Afghanistan.

"This is part of touching base ahead of that," Edwards said. "The conference is about rule of law also but also ensuring international commitment remains solid."

Ban also met the commander of Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), US General Dan McNeill, and senior UN representatives. He was due to leave Afghanistan later Friday.

US, Myanmar hold rare talks in China over Suu Kyi's release

AFP, Beijing

The United States held rare talks with the Myanmar military junta in Beijing to press for the release of the Southeast Asian state's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Department said Thursday.

At the China-brokered talks this week, US officials were "clear and direct" in demanding the release of the opposition leader and thousands of other political prisoners in Myanmar, spokesman Tom Casey said. The junta leaders however did not seem to relent, he said.

It was the highest level direct talks between the rival nations in recent years, with the US officials led by deputy US assistant secretary of state Eric John, the top Southeast Asian diplomat in the State Department.

One US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the discussions were "very pointed and very direct."

"I don't think we saw anything coming out of them that will indicate, unfortunately, that they have changed their basic opinions," Casey said of the junta leaders who attended the talks -- information

minister Kyaw Hsan, foreign minister Nyan Win and culture minister KhinAung Nyint.

"We certainly did not hear that they were planning on releasing Aung San Suu Kyi or other political prisoners," he said.

Myanmar requested the meeting and Beijing, instead of Yangon, was chosen as the venue because the junta refused to meet a key condition by Washington -- allow US officials to first meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent 11 of the past 18 years under house arrest, Casey said.

"The government of Burma often prefers that we would meet with them in Burma. Our longstanding policy is we will not meet them in Burma -- outside of our embassy offices -- if they will not allow us to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi," he said.

Myanmar has been ruled by the military since 1962.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won elections in 1990, but the military did not recognise the result and has kept her locked in her lakeside home, despite fierce international criticism.

Int'l community to ask Lanka, LTTE to talk peace

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The international community overseeing Sri Lanka's battered peace process will be asking Colombo and the Tamil Tigers to start talking again to end renewed bloodshed that has claimed thousands of lives.

The decision of government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to return to the negotiating table was the most important one the co-chairs to the peace initiative took at their June 25 meeting in Oslo.

At the same time, the US, Japan, the European Union and Norway decided that it was time for Norwegian diplomats to resume playing the role of active peace facilitator in the seemingly never ending conflict, IANS understands.

For the first time, the co-chairs did not issue any public statement after their consultations, which were described as a "working meeting" meant to exchange notes in the wake of several recent high profile visits to Sri Lanka.

Besides telling Sri Lanka and LTTE to stop the war and return to the negotiating table, both will also

be told to end human rights abuses, give humanitarian access to the island's northeast and also reopen visits and contacts for Norway.

The Oslo meeting was the first of the co-chairs after November 2006 when the grouping met in Washington. It followed talks Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim, the architect of the 2002 ceasefire agreement between the LTTE and Colombo, had with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse in Geneva this month.

Despite some hope, most countries, wiser by years of the now-peace-now-war situation in Sri Lanka, have their fingers tightly crossed.

The broad understanding is that President Rajapakse appears to realise that sympathy for him is waning, both domestically and abroad, despite crucial military victories against the LTTE in the island's eastern province.

The co-chairs feel that even if the Tigers are pushed out of the east completely, there can never be a military solution to the conflict and that both parties will have to return to talks to arrest the rapidly deteriorating situation.

At the same time, Sri Lanka seems to have no system or plan in place for talks. The military is also gung ho about its victories and strongly feels there should be no let up in the pressure being put on the LTTE.

To complicate the situation further, the co-chairs have no idea if LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran will respond seriously when they call for fresh negotiations that broke down last year.

Most participants at Oslo expressed dismay over the situation in Sri Lanka, where violence has left thousands dead since the end of 2005 besides forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in the northeast. Most victims are Tamils although Muslims and Sinhalese have also suffered. Some 20,000 Tamils have fled to India.

The war has also been marked by widespread human rights abuses, for which most blame has been laid at the government's doors.

Taliban creep back into Afghan district

Four killed in anti-Taliban raids

AFP, Washington/ Jalalabad

Fighters of the Islamist Taliban movement have infiltrated a strategic region of Afghanistan previously thought to be secured by US forces fighting the resurgent group, a US commander there said.

The Taliban have begun operating in the key province of Kapisa, some 30km from the capital Kabul, Colonel Jonathan Ives told reporters here, speaking from Afghanistan in a telephone conference.

"We thought that it was safe and secure in this province, and so we considered it to be a non-threat area. And so we didn't apply or maintain a security force," he said.

"It's strategically placed in order to create access or provide them access to areas of significant influence," he said, adding that the fighters in question were particularly concentrated in one district, Tagab.

"They have grown specifically in this one area," he said. Taliban forces composed of members of the local Pashtun ethnic group have multiplied four-fold from about 50 to 200 fighters.

Ives is in charge of operations of coalition forces in the northeast of the country, as commander of the Cincinnati task force.

Meanwhile, Afghan and foreign troops killed four men in anti-Taliban raids in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, police said as a local insisted the dead were villagers with no links to the rebels.

The US-led coalition said Taliban forces had opened fire on troops during the early-morning operations in the eastern province of Nangarhar and the soldiers had returned fire, killing some of them. It did not say how many.

US voices concern over disappearance of 350 Lankans

AFP, Colombo

The United States has voiced concern about the fate of 355 Sri Lankans who "disappeared" in recent months amid an escalation of the island's ethnic conflict, the government here said yesterday.

US ambassador Robert Blake gave a list of 355 names of people whose whereabouts were unknown, the foreign ministry said.

It said Colombo took the issue seriously and had launched investigations into the list presented soon after a visit here in March by US Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Mann.

Mann raised concerns about human rights during his visit.

The Colombo government's statement came amid mounting local and international criticism of

the island's rights record.

The US list of names contained a number of repetitions, the foreign ministry said in a statement. It did not say when the victims had disappeared or been abducted.

The US embassy confirmed that the United States had supplied Colombo with the list but declined to discuss details.

The statement came a day after a presidential commission said 430 civilians, were reported killed between September 14 and February 25 as the tropical island's Tamil separatist conflict escalated.

The majority of the dead belonged to the Tamil minority, the Special Presidential Commission on Disappearances said, and many of the victims were shot through the head with their hands tied behind their backs.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas shakes hands with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (R) after he delivered a speech yesterday before a Meeting of the Council of the Socialist International in Geneva. Abbas asked Friday in Geneva "to isolate" the Hamas, which took the control of the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian killed as Israel ends two-day West Bank raid

AFP, Nablus

Israeli troops yesterday shot dead a Palestinian man as the army wrapped up an extensive two-day operation in the flashpoint West Bank town of Nablus, security sources said.

Taxi driver Haysam Saleh, 28, was shot dead after he jumped out of his vehicle when troops pulled it over for inspection in the centre of the northern town, Palestinian security sources said.

An army spokesman said troops opened fire and identified hitting a gunman who got out of the taxi. The army said he belonged to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades militant group linked to president Mahmud

Abbas's Fatah party.

The spokesman denied troops fired on the taxi driver.

Dozens of Israeli troops and armoured jeeps withdrew from the Old City in the heart of historic Nablus, ending a two-day operation in which five soldiers were wounded, two seriously, in clashes and makeshift Palestinian bombings.

Nine Palestinian militants were arrested and several weapon caches uncovered during the Nablus raid, the army said.

Friday's death bring to 5,766 the number of people killed since the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising in September 2000, most of them Palestinians, according to an AFP tally.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan President Hamid Karzai (2R) talks with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon (2L) during a meeting at the presidential palace in Kabul yesterday. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon made a visit to Afghanistan for talks with President Hamid Karzai.