

N Korea may shut down N-reactor early

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it is considering shutting down its nuclear reactor as soon as a first shipment of heavy fuel reaches the Stalinist state as part of a nuclear disarmament pact.

Energy starved North Korea agreed in February to shutdown and seal its key Yongbyon reactor, which produces the raw material for bomb-making plutonium, in return for 50,000 tons of oil from South Korea.

But the North Korean foreign ministry said the shutdown could now occur "without waiting for the total quantity of heavy oil to reach its port."

"(North Korea) is now earnestly examining even the issue of suspending the operation of its nuclear facilities earlier than expected, that is from the moment the first shipment of heavy oil ... is made," the spokesman said in a statement carried by the North's official KCNA news agency.

South Korea promised to send its first shipment of fuel oil to its impoverished neighbour next Thursday, amid efforts to persuade the communist state quickly to shut down its nuclear weapons programme.

The South's Unification Ministry said yesterday that 6,200 tons of heavy fuel oil would leave south-east Ulsan port for the North's Sonbong port on July 12.

The North's decision to consider speeding up the closure was prompted by "the desire to facilitate the process of the six-party talks," the foreign ministry spokesman said.

Six-nation talks -- which involve the two Koreas, Japan, China, Russia and the United States, began in 2003 in an effort to convince North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons programme.

The North tested its first atomic weapon last October.

A timetable for the next six-nation talks may be announced by host China next week, South Korea's chief nuclear envoy Chun Yung-Woo said Friday.

"There's an expectation that China may know each countries' situation by next week and make a decision on a date," Chun said upon arrival at Seoul's airport after a trip to China.

"We can predict a date depending on the arrival of the oil and what action North Korea will take. It would be good for the six-party talks to restart after North Korea shuts down its Yongbyon facilities," he added.

Mosque clampdown boosts Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is riding high after cracking down on a radical mosque, with liberals who usually loathe him welcoming the move and no sign of an expected Islamist backlash.

The Red Mosque's attempts to enforce a Taliban-style mini-state in the heart of the leafy capital Islamabad had caused growing anger among residents, and prompted fears that extremism was spreading nationwide.

The humiliating capture this week of the firebrand mosque leader as he tried to flee the compound wearing a woman's burqa has demoralised some hardliners.

Although Abdul Aziz has been arrested and now faces criminal

charges, his brother, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, however has refused to surrender, saying he would prefer to be martyred.

"There is no concept of surrender in jihad (holy war). Aziz has embarrassed all jihadis," a senior member of an outlawed Islamic militant outfit told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Musharraf could now capitalise on his boost in support to try to ride out a separate crisis over his suspension of the nation's chief justice, and to press ahead with his fight against Islamic militants, analysts said.

"It's a win-win situation for Musharraf," Najam Sethi, editor of the English-language Daily Times newspaper, told AFP.

"Musharraf can use this success

against Islamic extremists and the Taliban in the tribal areas" bordering Afghanistan, Sethi said.

In Islamabad -- where the mosque's followers had shut down entertainment stores and burned "un-Islamic" CDs in the streets -- music shop owner Mohammad Atif said Musharraf had shown Pakistan was "not a banana republic".

The mood was vastly changed from just days ago when nationwide protests over Musharraf's ouster of top judge Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry entered a fourth straight month.

Sheikh Aftab, who runs a general store in the capital, said this week's operation had dispelled rumours that Musharraf was secretly in league with the mosque and using it to provide a distraction from the judicial crisis.

Musharraf has been accused by neighbouring Afghanistan of using his intelligence services to support Taliban militants there.

"Now at least that impression has been dismissed -- and also the impression that these fundamentalists are invincible because they have the backing of the state and are ideologically motivated," Aftab said.

Supporters of Pakistan's Islamic parties have staged demonstrations in several cities over the mosque siege but they were small compared to previous demonstrations on other issues.

Party sources said the lack of anger was because the Red Mosque was too extreme for them.

"These brothers did not follow the advice of senior clerics. Both major madrassa (Islamic schools) organisations appealed to them and played a role as mediators, but they ignored them," said one Islamic party official on condition of anonymity.

There was, however, anger over an interview with Aziz broadcast on state television on Wednesday, in which the captured cleric was forced to wear the burqa that he used to try to flee.

Parliamentary opposition leader and pro-Taliban hardliner Maulana Fazlur Rehman said in a telephone call to the channel: "You have shown no respect to humanity by interviewing him in a burqa."

Former Pakistani intelligence chief Hamid Gul, now a campaigning fundamentalist, warned Musharraf not to use the tactics he employed at the mosque with hardened militants in the tribal areas.



A pothole near Dhaka Polytechnic Institute at Tejgaon poses danger to passengers as well as pedestrians, but the authorities remain indifferent.

PHOTO: STAR

10X4

Strike paralyses Kashmir: 40 protesters injured

AFP, Srinagar

Forty people were hurt yesterday in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir when police fired teargas to break up protests over alleged rights abuses as a strike paralysed much of the state, police said. Police said a crowd of 700 demonstrators shouting "Down with the Indian army" and "We want freedom" blocked a key highway northeast of the main city of Srinagar leading to a major Hindu pilgrimage site.

"We had to fire shots in air and resort to teargassing and baton charges to disperse the protesters," police officer Nazir Ahmed said, adding 30 people were hurt in the melee. Police reported no serious injuries.

Tensions have been rising between Kashmiris and security

forces -- battling to suppress a nearly two-decade-old separatist insurgency in the Muslim-majority region -- over a slew of recent alleged rights abuses.

The latest unrest came after a soldier killed a civilian on Thursday after shooting into an angry crowd who saw him embracing a teenager in Kangan town near Srinagar, the urban hub of the revolt, which has claimed more than 42,000 lives.

Police said the soldier later killed himself with his rifle. Witnesses said the soldier had opened fire in panic at the sight of the crowd.

Meanwhile, in Srinagar, police hurled scores of teargas canisters to disperse several hundred demonstrators protesting alleged rights abuses by troops, a police spokesman said, adding ten people were hurt.

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