

N Korea willing to disable all nuclear facilities

AFP, Beijing

North Korea is willing to disable all nuclear facilities this year, disarmament negotiators said yesterday, just hours after UN experts confirmed its main reactor site had been shutdown.

The breakthrough raised hopes that an international deal to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programmes in exchange for aid was bearing fruit after years of on-again, off-again talks.

As envoys re-opened negotiations in the Chinese capital, the North said it was willing to declare and disable all its nuclear facilities by the end of the year in line with a February disarmament deal, South Korea said.

"North Korea showed its willingness to declare and disable (its nuclear facilities) within the shortest period of time, within this year, or five to six months," South Korean envoy Chun Yung-Woo told reporters.

Chun said no definitive agreement had been reached during the

six-nation talks, but there was a broad consensus among the envoys about what needed to be done for North Korea to disable all of its nuclear weapons programmes.

His remarks came just hours after the head of the UN atomic watchdog said UN inspectors, who were only allowed back into the secretive North to resume their work days ago, confirmed the North had closed down its main reactor complex.

Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said all five facilities at the Yongbyon reactor site were now offline.

"We have verified that all five nuclear facilities have been shut down and that appropriate measures have been put in place, including sealing some of these facilities," he said during a visit to Malaysia.

"We expect that in the next few weeks we will continue to apply the necessary monitoring and verification measures," he said.

Although the February deal called for the return of the UN inspectors, the team did not resume work until Saturday because North Korea insisted it would have to get hold of frozen funds and an initial shipment of fuel aid first.

It received both in recent weeks. Under the agreement, North Korea -- which tested an atom bomb last year -- would eventually abandon all of its nuclear weapons programmes in return for a wide range of economic, diplomatic and security incentives.

No one outside of North Korea is exactly sure about the extent of the hermit nation's nuclear weapons programme.

The United States, for instance, says that North Korea has secretly been operating a highly enriched uranium programme. Highly enriched uranium is used to make nuclear bombs.

The second phase of the accord would see North Korea declare and disable all of its nuclear programmes, and US envoy Christopher Hill went into Wednesday's talks saying he

wanted this to happen by the end of 2007.

The envoys -- from China, the two Koreas, the United States, Russia and Japan -- held a series of bilateral meetings on Wednesday morning, before holding a group discussion for 90 minutes in the afternoon.

Japanese chief negotiator Kenichiro Sasae also told reporters after the group meeting that North Korea had indicated it was willing to declare and disable all of its nuclear programmes.

"I have the impression that they are prepared to discuss the next step, having implemented the first step," Sasae said, but he emphasised that no definitive deal had been struck.

"There is no agreement at this point. We discussed how long it would take to do it but did not reach a conclusion."

Six-party talks were expected to resume today.

US arrests top al-Qaeda man in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

US forces have arrested the most senior Iraqi member of al-Qaeda in Iraq and believe he is a go-between between the group's foreign leaders and Osama bin Laden, a military spokesman said yesterday.

Brigadier General Kevin Bergner said the captured man Khaled al-Mashhadani was the most senior Iraqi member of al-Qaeda in the violence plagued country.

He said Mashhadani had told US interrogators that the supposed Iraqi leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq was fictitious and a front for Egyptian chief Abu Ayub al-Masri.

Bergner told reporters the voice representing alleged Qaeda kingpin "Omar al-Baghdadi" on propaganda recordings was that of an actor and that Masri was the real leader of the network's Iraqi affiliate.

"Al-Baghdadi, who has never been seen, is an actor. To make al-Baghdadi seem real al-Masri swore allegiance to him, knowing he was fictitious," he said.

"Masihadani confirmed that al-Masri and the al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders he surrounds himself with are foreigners," he said.

Controversy on as India elects president today

AFP, New Delhi

More controversy hit the favourite to win India's increasingly bitter presidential race yesterday, a day before votes are cast.

The 72-year-old Pratibha Patil, who looks set to be India's first woman president, already faces allegations of shielding family members from accusations of links to murder, abetting suicide and financial scams.

In the latest twist, a court sharply rebuked a federal investigating agency for failing to probe ties between an alleged murderer and Patil's brother, the Indian Express reported.

Patil has denied all the allegations, but presidential candidates in India and their families are expected to be free of scandal.

The ruling Congress party announced her candidacy last month even as opinion polls showed most Indians favoured a second term for the incumbent, President Abdul Kalam, who was nominated by the previous Hindu nationalist government.

But Kalam pulled out of the presidential race after the Congress and the opposition Hindu nationalist-dominated alliance

failed to agree on giving him another term.

The two main political alliances have since hurled bitter accusations against each other's candidates in a campaign that analysts said had taken the presidential poll to a new low in Indian history.

Allegations against Shekhatwani range from being suspended briefly for accepting a bribe as a policeman in 1947 to links with drug smugglers, the Hindi-language daily Dainik Bhaskar reported yesterday.

The Congress rejected nearly a dozen names, including those of foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee, in favour of Patil, whom analysts said was chosen because of her loyalty to the country's Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty.

"The president should be someone of stature, someone who sets the tone for public debate. The Congress could have thought of more distinguished candidates," Rangarajan said.

Patil was a virtual unknown nationally before he was nominated and has been dubbed a national embarrassment by the media.

In contrast, Kalam, a leading missile scientist, is often referred to as the "People's President" for his efforts to reach out to the nation while in office.

The Congress has hit out at Patil's rival, the 84-year-old Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhatwani, who is supported by the Hindu nationalists.

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"Both the sides are totally bereft of ideas, politically and intellectually. This sort of a dirty campaign is totally new, it has set a new low," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

Two days ahead of the poll, a pamphlet containing damaging articles about Patil's political record was posted to house-holds.

The opposition has also launched an anti-Patil website. "India diminished, Indians disgraced," the website banner read.

Muslim charity accused of terror funding in US court

AFP, Washington

An organisation which was once the largest Muslim charity in the United States has gone on trial for funding terrorism in a case set to test the administration's legal weapons in the "war on terror."

The case against the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development comes after its assets were dramatically seized three months after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

President George W. Bush declared the charity a front for Hamas, the militant Islamic group which now controls the Gaza Strip and is designated a terrorist organization by the US government.

"They did nothing to support terrorism."

The seizure of Holy Land's assets came after a 14-year investigation which included nearly a decade of wiretapping by government agents and the collection of reams of bank-transaction records.

The charity is not accused of directly financing terrorist activity, although at least two of its former organizers are related to high-ranking Hamas members, including Mussa Abu Marzuk and Khaled Meshal, both in charge of the group's political bureau in Syria.

Seven of Holy Land's top executives and the organization itself are charged with money laundering, tax evasion and conspiracy to provide material support and resources to a foreign terrorist organization. Two of the men are on the run.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani lawyers and volunteers carry the body of a victim at the blast site in Islamabad Tuesday. Suspended chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry was supposed to speak at a rally there, left, and tribesmen gather around a destroyed paramilitary check post after a blast in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan the same day.

Musharraf vows war on militants, rules out declaring emergency

AFP, Islamabad



Pervez Musharraf

President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday Pakistan was now in open battle with Islamic militants who have launched a spate of suicide attacks, but ruled out declaring a state of emergency.

Musharraf's tough declaration came after 34 people died in gunbattles in a tribal area bordering Afghanistan, a day after a suicide blast at an anti-government rally in Islamabad killed 17.

"We are in direct confrontation with extremist forces. It is moderates versus extremists," Musharraf was quoted as saying by a top government official who attended a meeting between the president and local media.

Military ruler Musharraf, who is under intense US pressure to crack down on Islamic extremism, pledged to attack those responsible for the upsurge in violence since government troops raided Islamabad's Red Mosque last week.

"We have to attack the source where suicide bombers are sprouting. We have a fair idea of who is behind that... we must attack those who sponsor them," he said.

However Musharraf, who seized

power in a 1999 coup, pledged that "there will be no emergency" despite the bloodshed, and added that the violence would not derail elections to be held early next year at the latest.

The United States has sharply ramped up the pressure on its regional ally to launch a full military offensive in Afghan border areas where it says insurgents are hiding out and plotting new 9/11 style attacks.

Investigators probing Tuesday's blast at a rally for the country's suspended chief justice in Islamabad found parts of a mutilated head believed to belong to the suicide bomber and were trying to trace his identity, police said.

The death toll rose to 17 overnight after two people died in hospital, interior ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Cheema said.

The explosion simultaneously brought to a head the two major crises facing embattled Musharraf -- his March 9 suspension of Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and the sudden upsurge of extremism in the country.

Speculation has swirled over who was behind the Islamabad

killings. Intelligence officials said they had intercepted telephone calls during the siege of the Red Mosque between its rebel cleric Abdul Rashid Ghazi and a top Taliban leader in the tribal belt, Baitullah Mehsud.

Mahsud, who was blamed for orchestrating a string of suicide attacks earlier this year, told Ghazi that "if he is killed his blood will not be wasted", the officials said. Ghazi was shot dead in the raid on the mosque on July 10.

Exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto -- said to be seeking an alliance with Musharraf -- agreed the blast was likely a militant backlash as it mainly hit workers from her secular Pakistan People's Party.

But many of the hundreds of lawyers at the event saw the hand of Pakistan's shadowy intelligence services in the attack.

Musharraf suspended Chaudhry on abuse of power charges, but Chaudhry's supporters say he was ousted because he could have threatened the president's continued grip on power.

The Supreme Court is expected to rule on the case this week.

Thailand lifts ban on new parties

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand lifted a ban yesterday on forming new political parties, but it remains unclear whether ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra's party can regroup in time to contest polls expected by year's end.

The National Legislative Assembly (NLA), appointed by military leaders who toppled Thaksin in a coup last year, overwhelmingly adopted a bill revoking the junta's ban on new parties, lawmaker Gothom Arya said.

Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the twice-elected party formed by Thaksin and led by him until his ouster, was dissolved in May after a court ruled that it had violated election laws.

Under the new law approved Wednesday, some members of the disbanded TRT would be able to form a new party, but they would struggle to do so in time to prepare for elections promised by the end of the year.

"Thai Rak Thai can file an application with the Election Commission to register under the same name, but the EC will take months to consider its application," said NLA member Prapan Khoonmee.

Libya finally commutes death sentence of 6 foreign medics

AFP, Sofia

Bulgaria said yesterday it had begun steps to secure the transfer from Libya of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor reprieved from death sentences over the infection of children with the AIDS virus.

"The procedure around the transfer... is already underway. I will request that the medical workers be allowed to serve out their sentences at home," Chief Prosecutor Boris Velchev said.

"The documents with which Bulgaria will request the extradition will be sent today to Libya," Velchev said, adding that the Palestinian doctor, who was recently granted Bulgarian nationality, would be included.

Libya's highest judicial body on Tuesday commuted to life in prison the death sentences on the six foreign medics after a multi-million dollar compensation deal was hammered out with victims' families.

The six, who have been on

death row since 2004, are expected to serve out their sentences in Bulgaria, as the two countries have an extradition treaty.

"We see no reasons for Libya to refuse the extradition," Velchev said, while stressing that the treaty provided no mandatory time framework for concluding any prisoner transfer.

The death penalty had been confirmed for a third time by Tripoli's Supreme Court last week.

But Libya's top legal body, the Supreme Judicial Council, commuted the death sentences to life in prison Tuesday after the families of the infected children received money under a compensation deal with the charitable Kadhafi foundation.

And as the world called on Libya to send the medics home, Bulgaria remained anxious that this was only the beginning of another chapter in their eight-year-long ordeal.

The family of twin girls infected with AIDS have also brought a civil suit against the six.

"Libya decides if the civil suits can hinder the transfer but if there is indeed an obstacle, it is technical and could be overcome," Velchev

British fighters intercept Russian bombers

The Times reports

AFP, London

Royal Air Force fighter jets were scrambled to intercept two Russian bombers heading for British airspace.

The Times said yesterday, prompting fierce denials of brinkmanship from Moscow.

The newspaper said two RAF Tornados from its rapid reaction force took off from RAF base Leeming in northern England to confront the two Tu95 "Bear" bombers after they were shadowed by F-16s from the Royal Norwegian Air Force.

An unnamed RAF spokesman was quoted as saying that the Russian bombers, based near the northern port city of Murmansk in the Arctic Circle, turned back before they reached British airspace.

The Times, which said the incident happened Tuesday, said there was no evidence to suggest it was linked to Britain's planned

expulsion of four diplomats over Russia's stance on the Alexander Litvinenko affair.

Russia on Tuesday promised a "targeted and appropriate" response to Britain's move, prompted by Moscow's refusal to extradite an ex-KGB agent suspected of poisoning the outspoken dissident in London last year.

But the daily said it smacked of "old-fashioned sabre-rattling" on the part of the Russian military and revived "the spirit of the Cold War" in the North Atlantic.

No-one at the defence ministry in London was immediately available for comment when contacted by AFP but there were swift denials from Russia.

Air force colonel Alexander Drobyshevsky was quoted by the news agency Interfax as saying: "Claims that Russian bombers were headed for British airspace don't correspond with reality."