

US, India finalise nuclear accord

AFP, Washington

The United States and India has finalised Friday an implementing agreement for their landmark civilian nuclear deal after extensive talks in Washington, officials said.

The draft accord allowing the United States to provide atomic technology and fuel to India will still require a final nod by the leaders of the two countries, the officials said.

"The agreement has been finalized but it awaits review by both governments," Rahul Chhabra, the spokesman for the Indian embassy, told AFP at the end of four days of talks late Friday.

The talks were led by US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns and Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon.

"The discussions were constructive and positive, and both Under Secretary Burns and Foreign Secretary Menon are pleased with the substantial progress made on the outstanding issues in the 123 agreement," a joint statement said.

"We will now refer the issue to our governments for final review," the statement.

The implementation agreement, or "123 agreement," is intended to capture all operational aspects of the nuclear deal, which was agreed upon by US President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh two years ago to highlight strategic ties between the world's two biggest democracies.

After government approval, the pact will have to be cleared by the Democratic-controlled US Congress, where lawmakers have vowed tight scrutiny.

The US Congress already approved the nuclear deal in principle last year and a bill to that effect was signed into law by Bush.

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India also needs to sign an additional protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency and get the approval of the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group.

The deal would reverse three decades of US sanctions imposed over nuclear tests carried out by India, which is not a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The United States and India "look forward to the completion of these remaining steps and to the conclusion of this historic initiative," said the joint statement.

The deal could open up a whopping 100 billion dollars in opportunities for American businesses, according to the US Chamber of Commerce.

The talks in Washington were supposed to end Wednesday but extended by two days after the two sides broke the "logjam" that had

blocked an accord for the last two years, officials had said, without elaborating.

The extended talk showed "there really is goodwill on the part of both sides to resolve outstanding differences and finish this key piece of the US-India civilian nuclear arrangement," said Tom Casey, a State Department spokesman.

He rejected any notion that the talks were troubled, amid some reports that Washington and New Delhi were desperately trying to salvage the deal.

"I certainly would take issue with the notion that these talks are somehow in trouble or that we don't ultimately feel confident that we will be able to reach an agreement," Casey said.

For the nuclear deal to be implemented, India should separate nuclear facilities for civilian and military use and set up a regime of international inspections to allay concerns that material and technol-

ogy received are not diverted to boost its nuclear weapons arsenal.

Despite several rounds of talks, India has stood fast against accepting any curbs on its reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel.

India also wants assurances that Washington will continue to supply fuel for its atomic plants in the event New Delhi conducts further nuclear weapons tests.

Under US law, if India conducts another nuclear test, the US president "must terminate all export and reexport of US-origin nuclear materials, nuclear equipment, and sensitive nuclear technology to India."

Indian officials have reportedly proposed to set up a special unit to reprocess spent atomic fuel at home under international safeguards in a bid to break the impasse.



AFP file photo shows Jawaharlal Nehru (2-L) talks with Lady Mountbatten during a function at the New Delhi Glider Club on February 27, 1959.

PAMELA MOUNTBATTEN SAYS IN HER NEW BOOK

AFP, New Delhi

The speculation has burned for decades. Were Edwina Mountbatten, the wife of the last Viceroy of India, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first post-independence prime minister, lovers?

Now Edwina's daughter, Pamela Mountbatten, says in a new book that while "love blossomed" between the "lonely" widowed prime minister and her British socialite mother, the relationship was purely platonic.

She says she knows because she often played "gooseberry," chaperoning Edwina and Nehru when they were together in India.

Pamela was 17 when she was taken out of school to accompany her father, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, and her mother to India.

She spent the next 15 months recording the birth of India and Pakistan, and her own transition to adulthood, in a gossip account of the dramatic days of the subcontinent's independence and partition.

Edwina and Nehru were deeply in love but "the relationship remained platonic," Pamela writes in the book, "India Remembered: A Personal Account of the Mountbattens During the Transfer of Power."

Pamela recounts that her mother, who was 44 at the time, had already had many lovers but her father "was injured to it" and was delighted to see her mother "so happy with Jawaharlal."

Mountbatten wrote in 1948 to Pamela's elder sister that, "She and Jawaharlal are so sweet together, they really dote on each

Nehru, Edwina were platonic lovers only

other in the nicest way... Mummy (Edwina) has been incredibly sweet lately and we've been such a happy family."

Pamela says in the book, based on her own personal diary entries and family letters, that the relationship with Nehru transformed Edwina.

"It made my mother, who could be quite difficult at times, as many very extraordinary women can be... lovely to be with. There were no prickles," she told Indian television network CNN-IBN.

Edwina became Nehru's confidante, says Pamela, the youngest of the Mountbattens' two daughters.

She quotes from a 1957 letter from Nehru to Edwina, in which he wrote: "I suddenly realised and perhaps you did also that there was a deeper attachment between us, that some uncontrollable force of which I was dimly aware drew us to one another."

"Although it was not physical, it was no less binding for that. It would last until death," writes Pamela, who now is 78.

She also says that Mountbatten found the relationship useful as he used Edwina to influence Nehru on policy matters during the transition from British colonial rule to independence.

"If things were particularly tricky my father would say to my mother, 'Do try to get Jawaharlal

to see that this is terribly important..." she says in the book.

"There existed a happy threesome," writes Pamela, referring to her mother, father and Nehru, who had been raised in an affluent, westernised family and who "spoke and wrote beautiful English (much better than our own)."

Edwina and Nehru met about twice a year after the Mountbattens left India in 1948, usually once in London and then her mother would include a visit to India in her overseas charity tours.

"We had been on an incredible journey with India which had changed the subcontinent," writes Pamela.

Edwina was on a visit abroad and had just left India to carry out a heavy programme of engagements in Borneo when she died in her sleep aged 58.

A packet of letters from Nehru was found by her bedside.

The letters during this 12-year correspondence "were a diary of everything he had been doing and the people he had seen, his hopes and fears," Pamela writes.

Nehru dispatched an Indian navy frigate to Edwina's funeral at sea off Portsmouth, England, and the sailors cast a marigold wreath into the ocean for him.

Pakistan says US threat to hit targets 'irresponsible, dangerous'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Friday called White House comments that US forces could unilaterally strike militant targets inside the country "irresponsible and dangerous."

The White House a day earlier refused to rule out striking at suspected terrorist targets inside Pakistan near the Afghan border and would not say whether US forces would first seek permission from Islamabad.

"Such comments and calls are irresponsible and dangerous," a Pakistan foreign ministry statement said.

"First and foremost Pakistan is combating extremism and terrorism in its own national interest. Secondly, Pakistan and the United States are partners in the international campaign against terrorism."

Washington has stepped up the pressure on President Pervez Musharraf to hit Islamist militants along the Afghan border, even as a mosque raid has sparked a deadly wave of suicide attacks that have killed more than 200 people.

Pakistan stressed that its military action had yielded "concrete results in terms of the disruption of Al-Qaeda and capture of its key leaders and operatives."

"Therefore it would be counter-productive to create an impression of any divergences or differences on the issue of counterterrorism."

US President George W. Bush's spokesman, Tony Snow, when asked by reporters Thursday whether US forces could strike militants inside Pakistan, said: "We never rule out any options, including striking actionable targets."

Asked whether Bush would first seek authorisation from Musharraf, Snow told reporters: "Those are matters that are best not discussed publicly."

The Islamabad statement Friday stressed that "we have repeatedly made our position clear that whatever counterterrorism action is to be taken inside Pakistan, it will be taken by our own security forces."



PHOTO: AFP

People wade through raging flood waters in Jinan in eastern China's Shandong province Wednesday. Torrential rains in eastern and southwestern China have taken dozens of lives while the grim rainy season claimed hundreds others since the start of the month.

La Nina pattern likely to play havoc with world's weather: UN

AFP, Geneva

The UN's weather agency on Friday said a disruptive La Nina climate pattern was taking shape in the Pacific, raising the prospect of an active Atlantic hurricane season and strong monsoons in Asia.

The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) said in a statement that the development of La Nina in the second half of 2007 was now "more likely than not" after an initial hesitation in the past two months.

The combination of tropical wind patterns over the Pacific Ocean and cooler than normal sea temperatures off the Pacific seaboard of Latin America generally has an impact "of planetary scale," WMO scientist Rupa Kumar Kolli said.

"La Nina conditions are frequently associated with stronger monsoon rainfall and flooding in Asia and... higher frequency of hurricanes in the Atlantic," he told journalists.

"Now things seem to be on track

for the development of La Nina, but it is likely to be a weak La Nina event rather than a strong one."

However, the WMO highlighted other unusual climatic conditions in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean which could reinforce the disruption to local weather in the coming months.

They included warmer than usual sea surface temperatures in the North Atlantic, an unusually warm sea current off the Atlantic coast of southern Africa, and similar warm conditions in the western Indian Ocean.

The nine to 12 month La Nina traditionally causes heavy rainfall in Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia, droughts in parts of South America, an increased number of storms in the tropical Atlantic, cold snaps in North America and wetter conditions in southeastern Africa.

The Atlantic hurricane season is at its most active in August and September. US experts have predicted that a total of about nine

to 10 Atlantic hurricanes could form in the course of 2007 after a relative lull last year.

In 2005, record hurricanes struck the US city of New Orleans and the southern US seaboard, on top of the Caribbean, killing about 1,500 people in the United States alone and causing massive flooding and economic disruption.

Monsoon rains generally sweep south Asia until September, causing flooding and hundreds of deaths every year in some of the world's most densely populated areas. Southwestern Pakistan has suffered harsh monsoons so far this season.

However, they also bring most of the annual rainfall to some areas and are vital for local farming.

La Nina brings the reverse pattern of extremes to the equally disruptive El Nino phenomenon, which was blamed for the worst droughts in a century in Australia, a record warm winter in South Korea, and floods in Bolivia and East Africa in 2006 and early 2007.

Bush bans CIA torture during questioning

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush on Friday forbid the CIA to torture suspected terrorists in its once-secret detention and interrogation programme but was criticised for his vague, "trust us" approach.

Human rights groups said the executive order left out critical details, such as controversial tactics that administration officials often describe as "enhanced interrogation techniques."

The order says that the CIA program, whose existence was confirmed in September 2006, must abide by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions on wartime detainees and directs the CIA director to enforce that standard.

It lists no specific practices that are affected, or punishments for violations, and does not describe in any further detail a secret CIA prison network that has drawn outrage from US allies in Europe.

Bush spokesman Tony Snow said the order barred "cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment" and "acts of violence serious enough to be considered comparable to murder, torture, mutilation, and cruel and inhuman treatment."

"It also prohibits 'willful and outrageous acts of personal abuse done for the purpose of humiliating or degrading the individual in a manner so serious that any reasonable person, considering the circumstances, would deem the acts beyond the bounds of human decency.'"

"And the order forbids acts intended to denigrate detainees' religion, religious practices or religious objects," Snow said.

However, Human Rights Watch slammed the order as "contrary to the Geneva Conventions" because it essentially affirmed CIA secret detentions, a program which is "illegal to its core," according to a statement.

"The key aspect of this is all the parts that aren't said," added Jennifer Daskal, HRW senior counter-terrorism counsel, who charged that the order allowed "a system of incommunicado detention to continue, with the blessing of the president."

"What we have here is an administration basically reciting a number of legal principles and saying 'trust us.' And that's hard to take from an administration that refuses to renounce waterboarding," she said.

N Korea renews demand for light water reactor

AFP, Beijing

North Korea's top nuclear envoy said yesterday Pyongyang wanted a light-water reactor as compensation for shutting down its nuclear programmes.

"For the shutdown, disabling, and eventual dismantlement, the light-water nuclear reactor should come in," Kim Kye-Gwan told reporters at Beijing airport before leaving for Pyongyang.

Kim's comments follow nuclear disarmament talks in Beijing that ended Friday with the Stalinist state reiterating its intention to declare all its nuclear programmes and disable them in return for fuel aid and diplomatic concessions.

No deadline was agreed upon during the three days of talks that involve China, the two Koreas, the United States, Japan and Russia.

The talks began in 2003 to rein in North Korea's nuclear ambitions, but the reclusive regime conducted its first atomic test in October last year.

The six nations agreed in September 2005 to discuss furnishing North Korea with light-water reactors "at an appropriate time," with Washington insisting that Pyongyang must first disable all its current nuclear programmes.

The reactors, which generate electricity, are sought by North Korea as the impoverished nation needs a steady energy supply.

Kim also Saturday accused Japan of causing a political crisis

that could lead to "disaster".

"They (Japan) are creating a political crisis worse than the financial sanctions, a crisis that infringes on our national sovereignty," Kim said.

He said he expressed his concerns to his Japanese counterpart, Kenichiro Sasae, during a rare bilateral meeting on Thursday in Beijing.

"I warned that if they take one more step forward a disaster would come," Kim said.

He refused to elaborate, but his comments came amid strong criticism from North Korea over Japan's recent forced auction of the headquarters of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, or Chongryon.

WORLD'S TALLEST BUILDING



AFP FILE PHOTO

Burj Dubai, a tower rising in the booming Gulf emirate, has become the tallest building in the world at 512.1 metres (1,680 feet), surpassing Taiwan's "Taipei 101" which is 508 meters (1,667 feet) tall, developers Emaar Properties said yesterday.