

US Cong sceptical of Indian nuke accord

Indian officials hail agreement

AFP, Washington/ New Delhi

Key US legislators looked sceptically at a landmark nuclear pact between the United States and India amid speculation that the terms could exceed what lawmakers would accept while Indian officials

President George W Bush said he looked forward to working with the Democratic-controlled Congress to implement the civilian nuclear deal, saying it marked "another step" in deepening ties with India, which he called "a vital world leader."

But Edward Markey, co-chairman of the House of Representatives Bipartisan Task Force on Non-proliferation, vowed that Congress would cast a careful eye on the fine print.

"I can only surmise that it includes provisions they fear will raise the hackles of Congress," said Markey.

"Of course the administration will argue that they aren't breaking the law, but I think that folks up on the (Capitol) Hill have become increasingly sceptical of the administration's legal arguments," he said.

Markey was among 23 House lawmakers who sent a letter to Bush this week reminding him that "any inconsistencies" between the agreement and US laws "will call congressional approval deeply into doubt."

Congress in December approved landmark legislation allowing US exports of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in 30 years, a move intended to reverse sanctions on the Asian giant for its nuclear tests.

But the new operating agreement goes one step further, allowing India to reprocess spent fuel under safeguards by the global nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, the US pointman in the talks to frame the pact.

That right to reprocess spent US-sourced nuclear fuel has been given only to Japan and the European Union so far, and US lawmakers had expressed scepticism over safeguards needed to deter India from possibly diverting any nuclear material to its military weapons programme.

Burns said that India had to first establish a new national nuclear

reprocessing facility under strict safeguards and then the two countries would agree on a set of arrangements and procedures for such activity.

India had given firm assurances that all nuclear material reprocessed would be used "only for peaceful purposes," Burns said.

Indian national security adviser MK Narayanan said the deal was not an opportunity for India to increase its nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, India's top nuclear scientist on Saturday hailed a nuclear pact with the United States as "a very good deal" that should satisfy both countries.

The long-delayed accord announced on Friday in Washington allows US exports of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in 30 years - a move intended to reverse sanctions imposed on the Asian giant for its nuclear tests.

It also allows India to reprocess spent fuel under safeguards imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency, going one step further than a law passed by the US Congress in December.

3 Nato troops killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Three Nato soldiers and an Afghan trooper were killed along with several insurgents in Afghanistan on Friday, while a helicopter gunship made a forced landing, the alliance said.

The deaths among the troops from the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force bring the number of foreign troops killed in Afghanistan this year to 124.

Isaf does not release the nationalities of the soldiers killed before their native country has been notified.

"I can confirm the death of two Isaf soldiers in eastern Afghanistan today (Friday)," a spokesman in the Isaf headquarters in Kabul said.

An official statement from the military force said a third Nato soldier was killed in the south of the country.

A second spokesman for the troops in eastern Afghanistan, Stern Berg, said 13 Isaf soldiers were injured in addition to 24 militants who were "killed or wounded."

"Two Isaf soldiers and an Afghan army soldier have been killed, 13 Isaf soldiers and a civilian have been wounded in the operation," said Berg.

The force also said in a press statement that an Isaf AH-64 Apache attack helicopter made a "precautionary landing" in eastern Kunar province bordering Pakistan today.

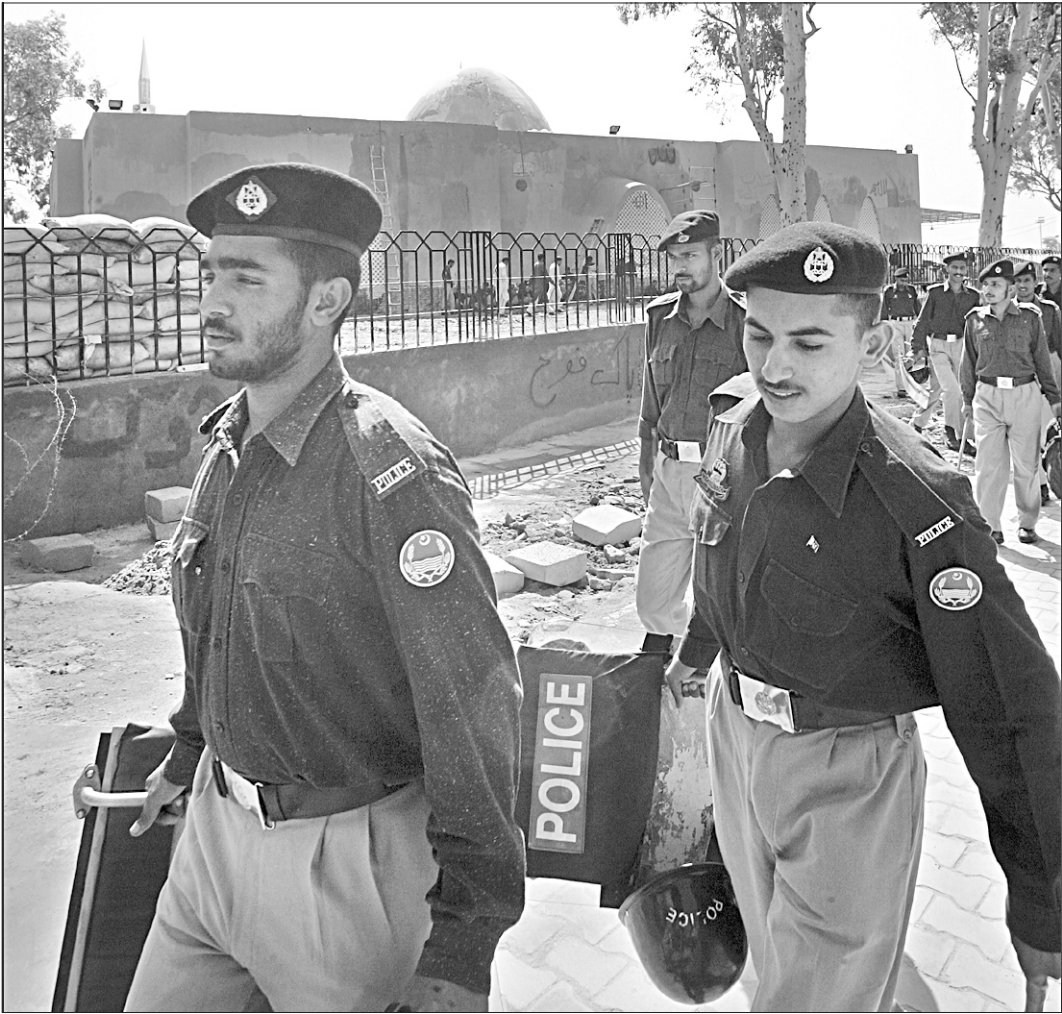


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani policemen are being deployed outside the Red Mosque in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan boosted security fearing further attacks a day after a suicide bombing during protests at Islamabad's pro-Taliban Red Mosque killed 14 people.

US Congress sends security bill to Bush

AP, Washington

Congress sent President Bush legislation Friday to intensify anti-terrorism efforts in the US, shifting money to high-risk states and cities and expanding screening of air and sea cargo to stave off future Sept. 11-style attacks.

The measure carries out major recommendations of the independent 9/11 Commission.

The bill, passed by the House on a 371-40 vote, ranks among the top accomplishments of the six-month-old Democratic Congress. The Senate approved the measure late Thursday by 85-8, and the White House said the president would sign the bill.

Six years after the Sept. 11 attacks and three years after the 9/11 Commission made its recommendations, "Congress is finally embracing what the 9/11 families have been saying all along," said Homeland Security Committee

Chairman Bennie Thompson, D-Miss. "It takes a willingness to do things a different way."

The bill elevates the importance of risk factors in determining which states and cities get federal security funds that would mean more money for such cities as New York and Washington and also puts money into a new programme to assure that security officials at every level can communicate with each other.

It would require screening of all cargo on passenger planes within three years and sets a five-year goal of scanning all container ships for nuclear devices before they leave foreign ports.

Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, I-Connecticut, who steered the legislation through the Senate with Sen Susan Collins, R-Maine, said it would "make our nation stronger, our cities and towns more secure and our families safer."

NUKE PLANT CLOSURE IAEA team in North Korea for monitoring

AFP, Beijing

A second team of UN inspectors arrived in North Korea yesterday to continue monitoring the secretive state's steps to shutdown its nuclear weapons programme, official Chinese media said.

The team of six inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency arrived in Pyongyang after a stopover in Beijing, Xinhua news agency said.

Ryszard Zarucki, who heads the inspection team, said they would take over monitoring and verification of the continued shutdown of the main Yongbyon reactor, which manufactured plutonium that could be used to make atomic bombs.

Zarucki said he would be briefed by the first team before his colleagues assumed their roles.

They arrived in Pyongyang with 60 pieces of luggage including equipment for inspections, Xinhua

said, adding that they would stay for about two weeks.

North Korea allowed inspectors back into the country this month for the first time in five years to verify the shutdown of facilities at Yongbyon.

The closure is the first step in a landmark agreement brokered in February in six-nation talks aimed at getting the reclusive regime to abandon its nuclear weapons programmes.

The latest round of six-nation talks in Beijing ended earlier this month with North Korea reiterating its intention to declare and disable all its nuclear programmes in return for fuel aid and diplomatic concessions.

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

Last campaign day ahead of Japan polls

AP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pleaded for support from his faltering Liberal Democratic Party on the eve of Sunday elections, saying that only the ruling bloc has the ability to turn around Japan's economy.

Wrapping up campaigning in what is expected to be one of the most heated elections in years, Abe told a crowd of thousands in central Tokyo: "We will move forward with reforms and improve the economy."

"There is no way the Democrats and other opposition parties can push through reforms," he said, rolling up his sleeves and speaking in a voice hoarse from a campaign that has failed to reverse his dismal poll ratings.

His own seat in the more powerful lower house is not up for election, but analysts and polls suggest

voter dissatisfaction with him could spill over and lead to the ousting of candidates from his long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Ichiro Ozawa, whose opposition Democratic Party of Japan has benefited from a series of scandals that have tarred Abe's government, said, "This is a truly important election that will determine the future of Japan. I am staking my life on this election."

Though leaders were stumping in different locations, their messages to the voters were pretty much the same: their opponent can't be trusted to run the government.

Setting up what is expected to be a very close battle, one-half of the seats in the 242-member upper house of parliament will be contested on Sunday. Polls suggest the ruling party headed by Abe may face difficulty maintaining its majority over the fast-rising Democrats, Japan's main opposition party.

Dozens killed as floods hit India, Nepal

AFP, Guwahati

Dozens of people have been killed and nearly three million hit by floods triggered by torrential monsoon rains in India and Nepal, officials said yesterday.

At least 38 people have died in heavy flooding and landslides across the region, where homes have been swept away and crops destroyed.

In Nepal, officials said 11 people had died this week in floods and landslides.

They said thousands of others were hit by the flooding, which disrupted road transport and shut down schools and markets in towns and villages in rain-lashed southern plains.

"Dozens of houses have been swept away and the crops damaged," said district administrator Durga Prasad Bhandari from the

town of Gaur, southwest of the capital Kathmandu.

Swirling floods in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, which adjoins Nepal, swept away 14 people and wreaked havoc, said officials.

Two million people were affected by the floods, which inundated homes and farms in India's second most populous state, they said.

Twelve people were killed in worst-hit Bhagalpur district, while two people drowned elsewhere in the state, the Press Trust of India quoted relief officials as saying.

The overnight deaths took India's rain-related toll to almost 800 since the onset of the monsoon in June, according to figures compiled from officials and media reports.

Authorities in Assam and Meghalaya appealed for help from the military after landslips and flash

Pak bomb blast probe begins

AP, Islamabad

Investigators sifted through the wreckage of a bombed-out restaurant in Pakistan's capital and scoured a government database on Saturday to try to identify the remains of a suicide attacker who killed 13 people a day earlier.

Officials also vowed to launch a top-level inquiry into why intelligence that warned of a potential attack at the busy downtown marketplace where Friday's blast occurred was not acted upon to prevent the attack.

Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao told The Associated Press that a joint task force of federal police and intelligence agencies was formed to investigate the blast, which targeted security forces and injured 71 people, mostly bystanders.

The attack at the open-air restaurant frequented by police happened shortly after protesters clashed with authorities as the city's Red Mosque reopened for the first time since the army ousted Islamic militants in a bloody raid two weeks ago.

Police found a torso and head among the wreckage they believe are the remains of a suicide bomber.

Sherpao said identification of the remains was being hampered because they were mangled in the blast. A search of the national identity card database had so far failed to reveal any leads, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) is meeting with Saudi Prince of Makkah Khaled al-Faisal in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah Friday. Musharraf is on a two-day visit to the Saudi kingdom, following a visit the United Arab Emirates amid reports he secretly met exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto in the UAE capital.

Crisis deepens in Iraq's divided government

Car bomb kills 4 in Baghdad

AFP, Ap, Baghdad

Iraq's dwindling Shia-led government and its largest Sunni bloc stepped up their war of words on Saturday, amid a crisis, which some lawmakers warned could bring down the ruling coalition.

Sunni ministers are boycotting government business, and the deepening crisis has cast doubt on the US-backed regime's ability to push through reforms designed to reunite the war-torn country.

Washington has demanded that series of law and constitutional amendments be passed to appease Sunni resentment and end faction fighting, as the programme was supposed to proceed alongside a surge of US troops into the country.

On Saturday, the main Sunni

bloc in the coalition reacted angrily to a rebuke from Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's spokesman, who had accused its ministers of disrupting legislation and had implied they were corrupt.

"The Iraqi Concord Front rejects and strongly condemns the statement of the official government spokesman and the lies and the insinuations and attacks on people known for their integrity," the Front said in a statement.

It came one day after Maliki's spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh launched his withering attack on the Sunni bloc, which holds 44 seats in parliament but has withdrawn its six ministers from the government.

"The politics of threats, of pressure, and of blackmail will not

work, and crippling the work of the government and the parliament and the political process will not return Iraq to the days of dictatorship," Dabbagh said.

This situation "does not benefit the people of Iraq, but those who fill their bank accounts outside the country by benefitting from the politics of complaining, crying, and begging in the name of this sect or that," he added.

Meanwhile, a parked car bomb exploded in a busy shopping street in predominantly Shia eastern Baghdad on Saturday, killing at least four people and wounding 10, police said.

The bomb was the latest in a series of explosions targeting commercial centres.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers use a raft made of banana plants to navigate through floodwaters near the village of Bordoloni in Dhemaji district, some 500km from Guwahati yesterday. At least 27 people have died and nearly three million hit by floods triggered by torrential monsoon rains in eastern India, officials said.

TV news helicopters collide in US: 4 killed

AP, Phoenix

Two news helicopters covering a police chase on live television collided and crashed to the ground Friday, killing all four people on board in a plunge that viewers saw as a jumble of spinning, broken images.

Both helicopters went down in a park in central Phoenix and caught fire. No one on the ground was hurt.

TV viewers did not actually witness the accident because cameras aboard both aircraft were pointed at the ground. But they saw video from one of the helicopters break up and begin to spin before the station abruptly switched to the studio.

Television station KNXV reported that it operated one of the choppers. The other was from KTVK. A pilot and photographer aboard each chopper were killed.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (C, top) shakes hands with supporters during an election campaign in Tokyo yesterday, on the eve of upper house elections. Abe is expected to face a stinging rebuke in elections as voters show more concern about scandals and the economy than his conservative agenda.