



US President George W Bush (R) speaks with a US Marine as he tours Al-Asad Air Base in Anbar Province, Iraq yesterday. Bush paid a surprise visit to Iraq on Monday, just days before a crucial report to Congress on Washington's strategy in the war-torn nation.

UK's Iraq pullout fuels tensions with US

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown defended Monday the withdrawal of troops from Basra city in Iraq, but the move will do little to ease mounting signs of tension between London and Washington.

Brown, who took over as premier from Tony Blair in June, stressed that British troops withdrawn to Basra airport remain on standby to deploy again if the security situation demanded.

"We are able to reintervene in certain circumstances. The purpose has been to hand the security over from the British army to the Iraqi security forces," he said, as London confirmed the pull-out of some 500 troops was complete.

"This is a pre-planned and this is an organised move," Brown told BBC radio.

"We will discharge all our responsibilities to the Iraqi people;

we will discharge our international obligations exacted in the United Nations."

But analysts have pointed out a cooling of relations between London and Washington under Brown, who is seen as attempting to distance himself from his predecessor's cosy ties with US President George W Bush.

Underlining the diverging policies, Bush made a surprise visit to Baghdad on Monday to take stock of a "surge" in US forces in Iraq, which has seen American troop levels boosted to record numbers.

The contrast between Bush going in while Brown defended a pull-out reflected the different stances, commentators said.

"We are seeing some tensions emerging from both sides," said Robert Lowe of London's Chatham House think-tank. "The governments are trying to keep things as harmonious as possible, but we are

seeing some strains."

The cooling of ties was signalled as soon as Brown took office, when he included a number of critics of US policy in his cabinet, including former UN deputy chief Mark Malloch Brown.

The former finance minister's first trip to meet Bush at the end of July also saw a market contrast with Blair, with Brown failing conspicuously to praise Bush personally and keeping contacts on a markedly formal level.

Over the past weekend, two senior British generals blasted the United States' handling of post-invasion Iraq, with one describing it as "fatally flawed."

Washington's policy was "intellectually bankrupt," said another — the retired General Sir Mike Jackson, the head of the British Army during the 2003 invasion.



Lebanese youths salute an army tank as it emerges from the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon yesterday. Lebanese soldiers hunted down fugitive militants Monday after crushing an Islamist group in fierce fighting that ended a 15-week standoff at the battered Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared.

Second arrest warrant issued for Thaksin

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai criminal court yesterday approved a second arrest warrant for ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, owner of the Manchester City football club, over fraud charges tied to a controversial share sale.

"The court approved an arrest warrant" for Thaksin and his wife Pojaman, said Pornchai Asawattananom, the deputy chief of the Justice Ministry's Department of Special Investigations (DSI).

The DSI is investigating the former first couple's alleged fraudulent filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission over a 2003 listing of a property company owned by Thaksin's family.

Ethnic groups claim responsibility for Nepali blasts

AFP, Kathmandu

Two ethnic groups from Nepal's restive southern Terai region claimed responsibility Monday for bombs that killed two people and injured around 30 in the country's capital over the weekend.

The three near-simultaneous explosions Sunday, one in a minibus, one at a bus stand and one outside Nepal's Army headquarters, prompted immediate condemnation from the government, former rebel Maoists and the United Nations.

Officials and local media said two little-known ethnic groups from the region — the Terai Army and the Nepal People's Army — said they carried out the attacks.

"Our group takes responsibility for the three blasts in Kathmandu. We want a separate state for the 19 districts of the Terai region," a man claiming to be a central committee member of the Terai Army also told AFP.

Musharraf, Benazir talks likely to resume in Dubai

Sharif 'determined' to oust military rule

AFP, PTI, Islamabad

Stalled talks on a deal between Pakistan military ruler Pervez Musharraf and former premier Benazir Bhutto are expected to resume soon, with the venue moving to Dubai, ministers said yesterday.

Negotiations held in London last week between the two-time prime minister and president Musharraf's top aides ended in deadlock, with Benazir saying that she would fly back to the crisis-hit Islamic republic regardless.

"Our stand is that dialogue should continue," Information Minister Muhammad Ali Durrani told AFP, despite the failure so far to thrash out a power-sharing deal

between the embattled general and his bitter rival.

He confirmed that Musharraf's top aide was in the Gulf emirate and said that it would "probably" be the venue for further discussions, as reported in several newspapers here.

The talks ran into trouble after the ruling Pakistan Muslim League Party opposed Benazir's demands that Musharraf should quit as army chief before being re-elected for another five-year term as president.

Benazir said he should also cede his powers to dissolve parliament, allow premiers to serve a third term and give an amnesty to herself and other politicians covering her two terms in power between 1989 and 1996.

"It is expected that the talks will be resumed," deputy information minister Tariq Azeem told AFP.

Azeem said some of Benazir's demands were "unrealistic" but would not elaborate, adding only: "If the demands are realistic, there are more chances of reaching an understanding."

Benazir's Pakistan People's Party confirmed that the ex-premier would be in Dubai late Monday. But spokesman Farhatullah Babar told AFP the visit was "not linked to the dialogue".

Benazir held secret talks with Musharraf in Abu Dhabi in July.

Meanwhile, ruling out any compromise with embattled President Pervez Musharraf, exiled former

Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif has called for the ousting of military-backed government in the country.

"... A uniform has no place in our constitution, has no place in politics. An army has no role in politics according to our law and according to our constitution," Sharif said in an interview with CNN's 'Late Edition' on Sunday.

Asked if Musharraf is acceptable on shedding uniform, Sharif replied: "Whether he gets himself elected in uniform or without uniform is unacceptable. And this is why the total... the entire civil society of the country, the 160 million people are struggling for..."

N Korea to declare end of nukes within this yr

AP, Geneva

North Korea agreed Sunday to account for and disable its atomic programmes by the end of the year, offering its first timeline for a process long sought by nuclear negotiators, the chief US envoy said.

Kim Gye Gwan, head of the North Korean delegation, said separately his country's willingness to cooperate was clear in return for "political and economic compensation" but he mentioned no dates.

Christopher Hill, a US assistant secretary of state, said two days of talks between the United States and North Korea in Geneva had been "very good and very substantive" and would help improve chances of a successful meeting later this month with Japan, Russia, South Korea and China in six-nation talks aimed at ending the North's nuclear weapons

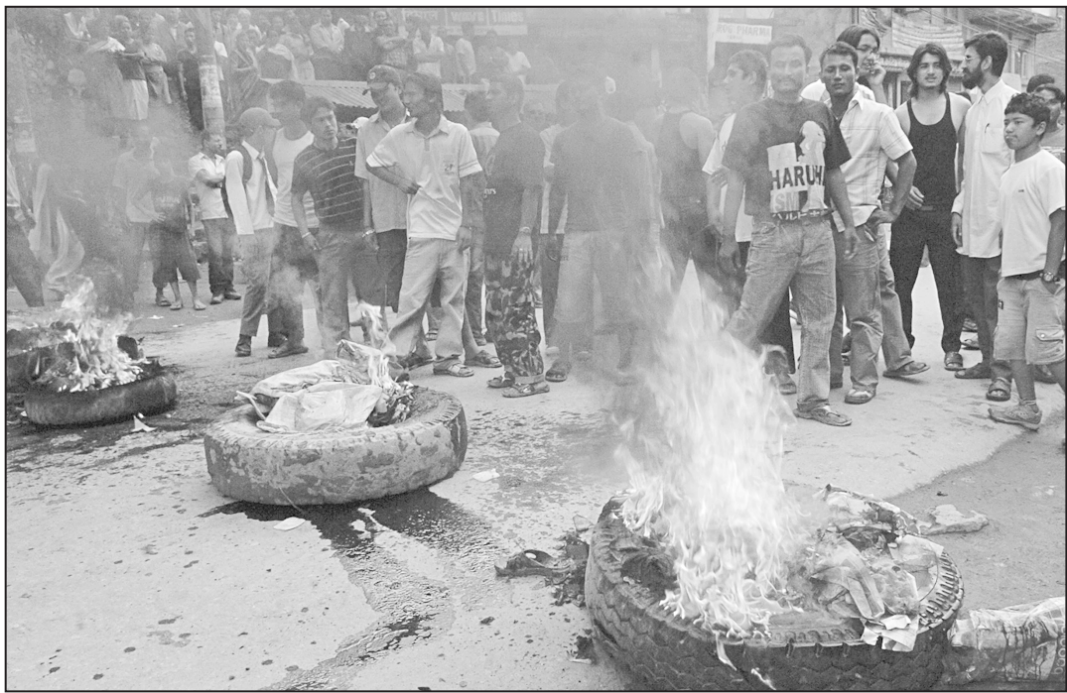
programme and improving relations between North Korea and other countries.

"One thing that we agreed on is that the DPRK will provide a full declaration of all of their nuclear programmes and will disable their nuclear programmes by the end of this year, 2007," Hill told reporters, using the initials for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Hill said the declaration will also include uranium enrichment programmes, which the United States fears could be used to make nuclear weapons.

"When we say all nuclear programmes, we mean all," he said.

He said later in response to a question from The Associated Press that it was the first time that North Korea had ever offered a timeline for declaring and disabling its nuclear programme.



Nepalese people block the traffic as they burn tyres to protest the death of Anita KC, who was killed in a bomb blast the day before, in Kathmandu yesterday. Two ethnic groups from Nepal's restive southern Terai region claimed responsibility for bombs that killed two people and injured around 30 in the country's capital over the weekend.

Lanka blocks rebel supply route

AFP, Colombo

Troops in Sri Lanka have blocked a key supply route used by the Tamil Tigers in possible preparation for a delayed major assault on the rebels' northern heartland, military experts said yesterday.

The military has been trying to break into the stronghold, the Wanni, for weeks but took some nearby areas on Saturday, including the coastal village of Silavattura, officials aid.

"This was not the big push. What the army has captured is a key

transit point of the Tigers," a top military official said, declining to be named. "They used this location to smuggle in supplies from India."

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) indirectly admitted that the military had taken the coastal village when they accused security forces of killing nine civilians fleeing the military onslaught.

Aid officials said at least a dozen civilians were killed in weekend fighting in the district of Mannar. Both the rebels and government forces blamed each other for the civilian deaths.

Retired army brigadier general Vipul Boteju said the weekend clashes could be a warm up for a bigger offensive aimed at dismantling the mini-state run by the rebels in Wanni.

"This may have a psychological impact. It can also block a supply line, but it does not signal the start of the big push to Wanni," Boteju told AFP.

He argued that the military lacked men and firepower to undertake a bigger drive in terrain that favoured the guerrillas.

Iran will outsmart West on nuclear issue

Says Khamenei

AFP, Tehran

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei pledged on Monday that Iran would never yield to Western pressure over its nuclear programme, and it would outsmart "drunken and arrogant" Western opponents in the standoff.

The renewed expression of defiance from Iran's undisputed number one came after US President George W. Bush said last week that allowing Tehran's nuclear drive to continue unabated could spark a "nuclear holocaust."

"The Iranian nation has withstood and it will withstand intimidation. It will never bow to any intimidation in the nuclear issue and in other matters," state broadcasting quoted Khamenei as telling a group of elite students.

"Iran will defeat these drunken and arrogant powers using its artful and wise ways," he added.

Washington accuses Tehran of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons — an allegation vehemently denied by the Islamic republic — and has never ruled out taking military action against it.

"Iran's active pursuit of technology that could lead to nuclear weapons threatens to put a region already known for instability and violence

under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust," Bush said on August 28.

Khamenei slammed Bush's latest verbal attack, calling it "hateful, arrogant and violent."

The sharpening rhetoric between the two arch-foes comes amid renewed cooperation between Iran and the UN atomic energy agency to answer outstanding questions on the nature of Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

While the Vienna-based watchdog has described the agreement with Tehran as a significant step forward, Washington has expressed serious reservations that it does not go far enough.



Kashmiri rebel commander and senior leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Javeed Ahmed Mir (C) and activists of various other parties go on a hunger strike to protest against the human rights violation on Kashmiri people by Indian security forces in Srinagar yesterday.