

Junta seeks smooth ties with Suu Kyi

China opposes strong UN action against Myanmar

Myanmar's ruling junta said yesterday it hoped to achieve "smooth relations" with detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, a day after suggesting that her release from house arrest was unlikely to happen anytime soon.

China, meanwhile, reiterated its stance that international sanctions and pressure would not resolve the crisis in Myanmar, where the government has violently cracked down on pro-democracy protesters.

China said on Tuesday it opposed any strong world pressure against close ally Myanmar over the bloody repression of democracy demonstrations, warning that it could exacerbate tensions there.

"Sanctions or pressure will not help to resolve the issues (in

Myanmar)," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said.

China, which has strong ties with Myanmar's military government and is its main protector at the United Nations, is leading efforts to water down a UN Security Council resolution on the unrest in the Southeast Asian country.

The New Light of Myanmar newspaper, a mouthpiece of the junta, printed a brief official announcement on its front page saying that Deputy Labour Minister Aung Mye Theik had been appointed "minister for relations" to coordinate contacts with Suu Kyi, the country's democracy icon.

The appointment was suggested by UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari during his visit to Myanmar earlier this month, the statement said. It added that the

junta had accepted the idea "in respect of Gambari's recommendation and in view of smooth relations with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi."

"Dav" is a polite term for addressing older women.

The printed statement followed a similar announcement the night before on state radio and television, a move that came amid intense international pressure for the junta to enter talks with Myanmar's democracy movement.

The new official's duties were not detailed, and the announcement did not say when he might meet with the 62-year-old Suu Kyi, a Nobel peace laureate who has been under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years without trial.

It appeared, however, that Aung Kyi would coordinate Suu Kyi's contacts with both the regime and

the UN, which is seeking to end the political deadlock between democracy advocates and a military that has ruled since 1962.

Aung Kyi has a reputation among foreign diplomats, UN officials and aid groups as being relatively accessible and reasonable compared to top junta leaders.

But the state-run newspaper suggested in a Monday commentary that Suu Kyi would remain under house arrest until a new constitution was in place, a milestone that diplomats say could take years to achieve.

So far, only the first stage of drawing up guidelines for a new constitution has been completed, a process that took over a decade. The road map process is supposed to culminate in a general election at an unspecified date in the future.



The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mohammed ElBaradei (7-R) and Indian Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Anil Kakodkar (9R) views a demonstration of the Bhabhatron II - an advanced cancer treatment device after inaugurating it at a function at the Advanced Centre for Treatment, Research & Education in Cancer (ACTREC) in Mumbai yesterday. UN atomic energy chief Mohammed ElBaradei began a three-day visit to India as the country's ruling coalition appeared headed for a break-up over a civil nuclear energy pact with the United States.

14 Taliban killed in Afghan battles

About 100 Taliban stormed a remote police post, sparking lengthy exchanges which left 10 militants and a policeman dead, while four rebels died elsewhere, officials said yesterday.

After 11 hours of fighting overnight in the western province of Farah, the attackers left three bodies at the scene and took the rest with them, provincial police operations chief Juma Khan told AFP.

"Ten Taliban were killed, 10 Taliban were wounded and a policeman was also martyred in the battle," Khan said.

In another incident on Monday, four Taliban were killed when Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) ambushed them in the eastern province of Paktika.

"Isaf ambushed the Taliban as they crossed into Afghanistan from Pakistan. Their bodies were brought to the provincial capital," said army spokesman Colonel Mohammad Gul said.

Union Cabinet approves president's rule in Karnataka

In a meeting held yesterday, the Union Cabinet decided in favour of the imposition of the President's rule in Karnataka.

Karnataka Governor Rameshwar Thakur had on Monday recommended imposition of President's rule in the state after the H D Kumaraswamy government was reduced to minority following withdrawal of support by the BJP.

The Congress core group met on Monday night to take stock of the political situation in the state hours after Chief Minister Kumaraswamy submitted his resignation to the Governor.

The meeting, held at the residence of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was also attended by Congress president Sonia Gandhi, senior ministers Pranab Mukherjee, Arjun Singh, A K Antony and H R Bhadradwaj, National Security Adviser M K Narayanan and Home Secretary Madhukar Gupta.

Car explodes in Basque city, one injured

A car exploded Tuesday in Spain's northern Basque country, wounding a bodyguard, regional authorities said.

Spanish media said the blast had the hallmarks of the armed Basque separatist group ETA, and targeted a local legislator from the Basque Socialist Party in the town of Galdakao, Jose Domingo, who was unhurt.

The blast occurred in the city of Bilbao at around 1:25pm, a spokesman for the Basque interior ministry said. He said a bodyguard was wounded.

Extra Pakistan judge to hear Musharraf election case

A Pakistan Supreme Court bench that will rule on the legality of President Pervez Musharraf's overwhelming electoral victory was expanded yesterday, officials said.

The number of judges to hear challenges from next week on the validity of the controversial election was expanded to 11, officials said, possibly to reduce the risk of a tied decision.

"Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry has enlarged the ten-member bench by adding one more judge," the court's spokesman Arshad Munir told AFP.

Israeli police grill Olmert in corruption probe

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was grilled by police on Tuesday over his alleged abuse of influence in the privatisation of Israel's second-largest bank two years ago.

Police investigators arrived at Olmert's Jerusalem residence around 0700 GMT to question the premier, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP.

"He is the last person to face the investigators in the Bank Leumi affair," he said.

The questioning is part of a criminal probe that was ordered by Attorney General Menahem Mazuz in January into the 2005 privatisation of Bank Leumi.

Israel seizes Arab land near Jerusalem

Israel has ordered the confiscation of Arab land outside east Jerusalem, the army and Palestinian officials said yesterday, reviving fears that the occupied West Bank could be split in two.

Hassan Abed Rabbo at the Palestinian local government ministry said the late September order covers 110 hectares (272 acres) in four Palestinian villages between east Jerusalem and the Jewish settlement of Maale Adumim.

The land could create a bloc of settlements incorporating Maale Adumim and nearby Mishor Adumim and Kedar, he said, and "prevent Palestinian territorial continuity" between the West Bank and Jordan Valley.

The army orders given to landowners, a copy of which was seen by AFP, justified the expropriation on "military grounds" and for "measures designed to stop terrorists".

The army confirmed Israel was constructing a 15.5 kilometre (10 mile) road connecting east Jerusalem with the West Bank town of Jericho on 144 hectares of state-owned land and 23 hectares of private land "which was appropriated."

Israel's Haaretz newspaper said the appropriated land would be used to build a new road for Palestinians only and would also allow for the development of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

"That in turn would 'free up' the E-1 area between Jerusalem and Maale Adumim, through which the current Jerusalem-Jericho road runs, for a long-planned Jewish development consisting of 3,500 apartments and an industrial park," Haaretz wrote.

In 2005, Israel -- under US pressure -- froze plans to connect Maale Adumim to east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to make the capital of their promised state and which Israel has occupied since 1967.

The Palestinians heavily criticised the project because it would effectively split the West Bank and separate the territory from east Jerusalem.

Israelis and Palestinians are trying to draw up a joint document which would serve as a basis for final-status negotiations ahead of an international meeting on the Middle East scheduled for next month in the United States.

Jewish settlement activity has been one of several stumbling blocks that have precluded an agreement in past Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

"We condemn this Israeli decision to confiscate Palestinian land at a time in which we are trying to revive the peace process," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP.

"Settlement expansion, especially in the Jerusalem area, will undermine and destroy these efforts. We call upon the Israeli government to revoke this decision and give peace a chance," he added.

UPA-Left meet fails to break impasse on N-deal with US

N-talks only when India is ready: IAEA chief

The crucial meeting of the UPA-Left committee on the Indo-US nuclear deal was held in the capital on Tuesday, amid strong and divergent views expressed by both sides on the issue that further fuelled speculation about mid-term polls.

All participants of the 15-member panel took part in the meeting held at the office of External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, the chairman of the committee, in South Block.

Even as there was a talk of another round of discussions between the sides parties early next week, the Left parties are likely to meet later in the day to take stock of the situation.

Both sides had exchanged notes on the subject to be taken up for discussion on Tuesday.

The meeting comes in the backdrop of widening of rift on the nuclear deal with Left parties rejecting a plea of the government that it be allowed to engage in negotiations with the IAEA.

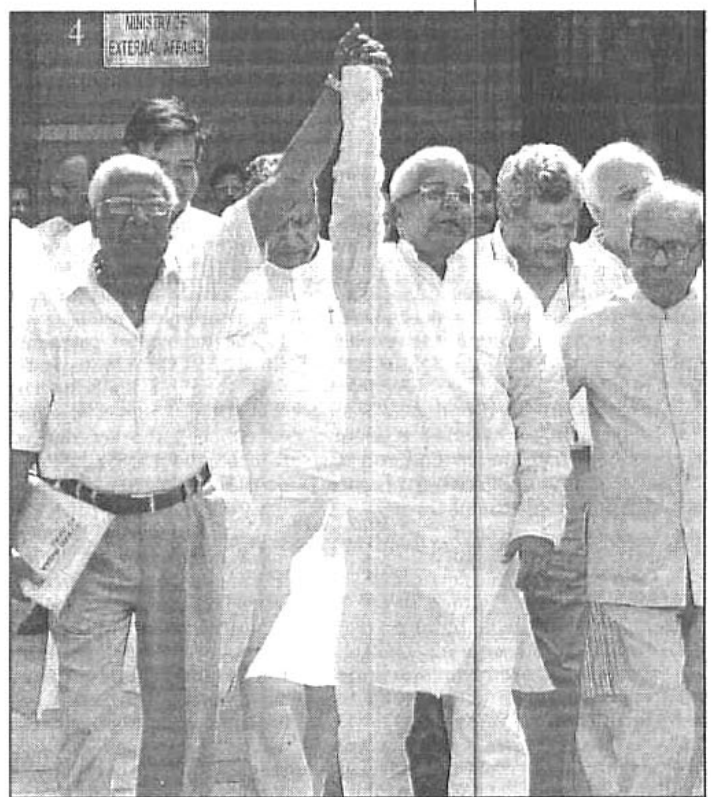
In their note, the four parties supporting the Congress-led coalition from outside have asked the government whether it can assure that India's foreign and security policies would not be compromised with the global American interests due to the Indo-US defence and nuclear agreements.

The government has sent its reply to the Left note.

Meanwhile, IAEA chief Mohammed El Baradei on Tuesday expressed confidence on firming up nuclear safeguards agreement with India whenever government here decides to talk.

Baradei is currently on a four-day visit to India.

Earlier, the Left parties appeared to have persuaded the government from going ahead with any negotiations with the IAEA on the nuclear deal for the time being during a meeting they had with UPA leaders.



Indian Railways Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav (C) shakes hands with Communist Party of India (CPI) general secretary AB Bardhan (L) as Indian Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee (R) looks on after the UPA-Left Parties' meeting at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi yesterday. India's troubled coalition held fresh talks over a contentious nuclear energy pact with the United States that has threatened to tear the government apart and force early polls.

Japan extends sanctions against N Korea

Japan extended sanctions yesterday against North Korea by another six months to mid-April to keep up the pressure on Pyongyang over its abductions of Japanese nationals, government officials said.

The decision was made at a cabinet meeting, an official said, on the first anniversary of the North's first ever atomic weapons test.

"Marking this occasion, we want to renew our demand that North Korea take concrete action towards the resolution of the relevant issues," Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura told a news conference.

The sanctions will cover the period from October 14 to April 13, according to a foreign ministry official in charge of Northeast Asian affairs.

Although the extension technically needs parliament's endorsement, that is regarded as a formality as the opposition has said it has no objections.

It came despite a big step forward in disarmament talks last week, when the communist state

Iran, IAEA begin talks on nuclear questions

Iran yesterday began talks with a delegation from the UN nuclear watchdog on Tehran's controversial uranium enrichment programme, state television said.

"The talks started at 2:00 pm," the television said, adding that the Iranian team was being led by Javad Vaidi, deputy to Ali Larijani, Tehran's chief nuclear negotiator.

Olli Heinonen, the International Atomic Energy Agency's deputy director general for safeguards, is leading the IAEA delegation in the discussions, which are expected to last two or three days.

The IAEA is seeking details on how Iran obtained components for its P1 type centrifuges, of which more than 2,000 are in operation at its nuclear enrichment plant at Natanz, and on its research with the more efficient P2 model.

The new talks follow an agreement reached in August for Tehran to provide answers to outstanding questions over its nuclear programme including plutonium experiments.

Much of the West, headed by the



A Vietnamese military medical team is seen on a rescue mission at flooded Thuong village in the Gia Minh commune, Gia Vien district, in the northern province of Ninh Binh yesterday. The worst floods in decades that followed last week's typhoon have left hundreds of homes submerged in the brown overflow of the Hoang Long river.



Anti-war protesters march down Whitehall to Parliament Square, in central London on Monday. Britain is to cut the number of its troops in Iraq to 2,500 by next spring, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Monday, in a long-expected statement.

Brown 'running away' from Iraq: Analysts

Britain is "running away" from Iraq, partly due to Prime Minister Gordon Brown's desire to distance himself from Tony Blair, experts said Tuesday.

Brown said Monday that British troop numbers would be cut by more than half to 2,500 by early next year as Iraqis assume control of Basra province in the south, while one official suggested all troops could be out by the end of 2008.

Britain had 5,500 troops based in and around the port city of Basra at the start of September and 7,000 soldiers in Afghanistan -- a number that will shortly rise to 7,700.

The head of the army, General Richard Dannatt, has warned that British troops in the Nato force are overstretched and need urgent reinforcement to be effective against the Taliban.

The analysts said Brown, who has forged a reputation for caution, was taking an enormous gamble because of uncertainty about the future security situation in Basra.

Toby Dodge, from the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), and retired army major Charles Heyman, editor of Armed Forces of the United Kingdom, said the strategy was in part due to political expediency.

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq is still divisive in Britain, not least in Brown's own governing Labour Party. Blair's decision to back US President George W. Bush hastened his departure from office earlier this year.

As finance minister, Brown both voted for and bankrolled the war but "Prime Minister Brown needs to prove to the British people that he is different to Blair", Dodge told

7 bodies found after Washington plane crash

Seven bodies were recovered from the wreckage of a plane that crashed in the Cascade Mountains, and authorities said the other three people aboard were also believed dead.

Searchers who found the wreckage Monday night were able to verify by serial number that it was the plane carrying nine skydivers and a pilot that went missing a day earlier, said Tina Wilson, a Yakima Valley Emergency Management spokeswoman.

The names of those aboard were not released. Jim Hall, director of Yakima Valley Emergency Management, said none appeared to have survived, and that their families were notified.

Seven people on board "have been found deceased," Yakima County Sheriff Ken Irwin said in a statement. Recovery efforts were suspended for the night but were to resume Tuesday.