

Indo-US nuke deal to be inked tomorrow

PTI, Washington

India and the US may ink the landmark nuclear deal as early as Friday after President George W. Bush signs into law the legislation on the initiative.

The signing of the HR7081, the approval legislation for the US-India civilian nuclear agreement, into law by Bush, on Wednesday night will be followed by formal linking of the accord by the two countries, which will be done by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee.

According to the sources, a formal announcement of when Mukherjee and Rice will sign the agreement has not been made but the event could come as early as Friday.

Bush, who had entered into the historic accord with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh three years ago, will sign the legislation on the nuclear deal into law at 2:25 pm local time (2:35 hrs IST tonight) at the ornate East Room of White House.

Pak parliament gets rare briefing on militant threat

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's parliament met Wednesday amid massive security for an unprecedented intelligence briefing on the threat posed by al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, officials said.

Helicopters circled central Islamabad and thousands of troops and police stood guard at checkpoints around the city, the scene of a devastating bombing last month at the luxury Marriott Hotel.

President Asif Ali Zardari and other lawmakers heard military and spy chiefs outline the gravity of the fight against extremists in northwestern Pakistan and the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan and the progress so far.

"Both houses of parliament have met and they are now receiving the briefing," an official in the parliament media office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, named last week to take over as head of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, led the briefing. A question-and-answer session will follow, officials said.

The session was a "historic event and we hope it will make MPs from all parties aware of the security threat facing the country," said Farzana Raja, a key aide to Zardari and senior member of the ruling Pakistan People's Party.

"This is Pakistan's war now, and we hope lawmakers will come up with proposals to formulate a home-grown counter-terrorism strategy to deal with the threat," she said.

Pakistan has suffered a wave of suicide bombings in the past two years, leaving around 1,200 people dead, while Zardari is under intense US pressure to rein in the militants.

The aim is to sensitise lawmakers to the grave security threat to national security posed by militants operating in the northwest, a senior government official said.

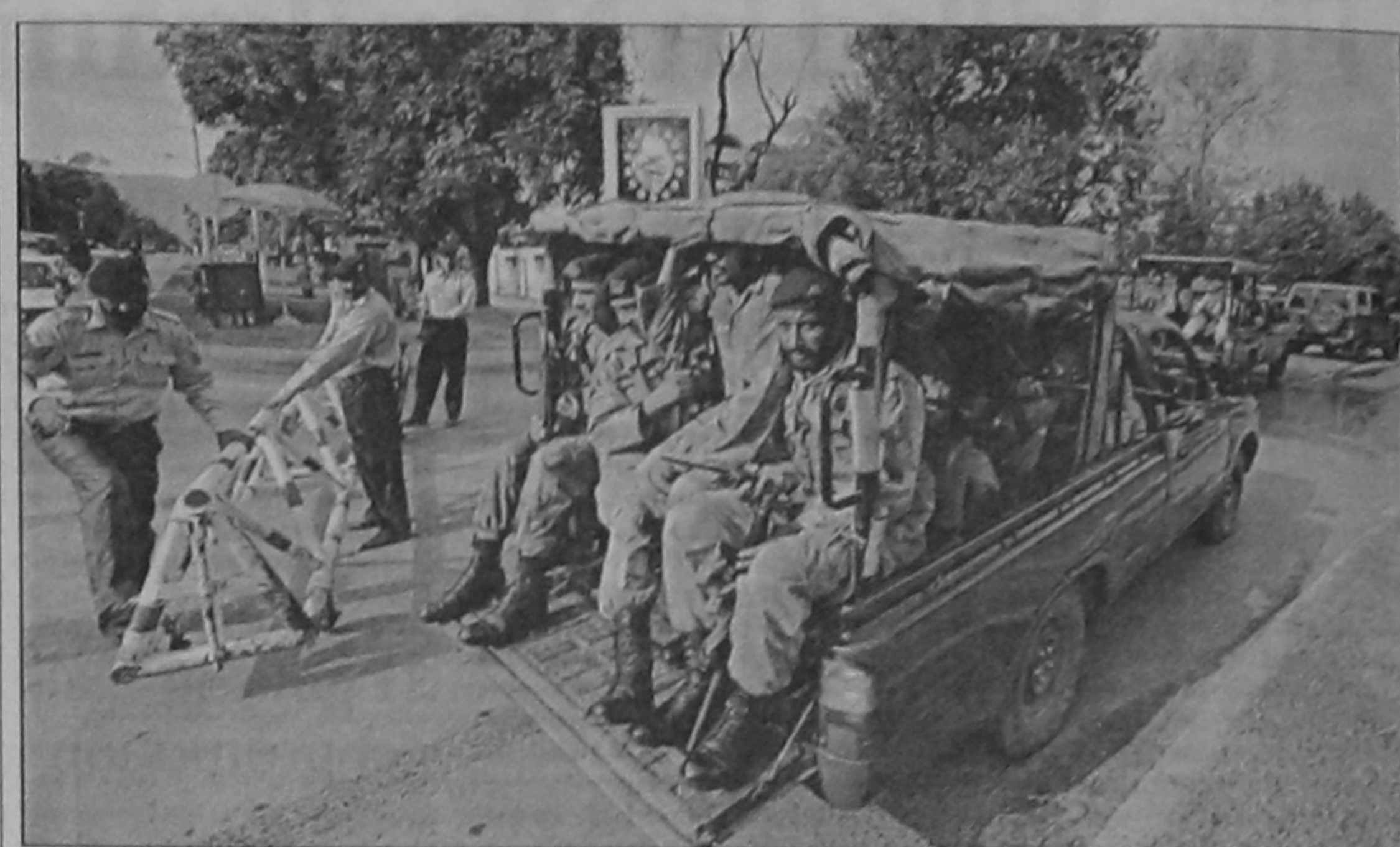
Police used coils of barbed wire and concrete barriers to block roads around parliament, where the senate and national assembly were due to meet to ward off possible attacks.

The meeting comes as Pakistani troops continue to battle al-Qaeda and Taliban-linked militants in the tribal region of Bajaur in a major operation launched in August.

It is the latest and bloodiest phase of Pakistan's battle against Islamist extremists since it joined the US-led "war on terror" after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to topple the Taliban regime.

The threat was underscored by the Marriott bombing on September 20, one of the worst terror attacks in Pakistan's history, in which 60 people were killed, including two US military personnel and the Czech ambassador.

The offensive came after Islamabad came under growing criticism from Washington over its failure to curb attacks on international forces across the border in Afghanistan.



Pakistani Army troops patrol near the parliament in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan's parliament meets amid massive security for a rare intelligence briefing on the threat posed by al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

Everest plane crash kills 18 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A passenger plane crashed on landing at a remote airfield in Nepal's Everest region yesterday, killing 18 people most of whom were German tourists, Nepalese officials said.

The Yeti Airlines aircraft, flying from the capital Kathmandu to Lukla in eastern Nepal, burst into flames after crash-landing near the sloping runway, eyewitnesses reported.

Of the 19 people on board, 14 were foreigners and five were Nepalese, and only one -- the Nepalese pilot of the Twin Otter plane -- survived, airport official Mohan Adhikari said.

"There were 12 Germans and two Australians on the flight," said Adhikari.

Officials earlier said the passenger manifest listed two of the tourists as Swiss, but they were later confirmed as Australian.

Security staff and volunteers took two hours to extinguish the fire in the wreckage of the plane, said Suraj Kunwar, a local journalist at the airport, 140km northeast of Kathmandu.

Hundreds of tourists and residents from Lukla gathered to watch the recovery operation, many in tears.

"Officials at the airport here have said that bad weather was the reason for the crash. There was heavy cloud when the accident occurred," Kunwar said.

Pak troops kill 20 militants in tribal area

AFP, Kar

At least 20 al-Qaeda linked militants, eight of them foreigners, were killed when Pakistani helicopter gunships hit rebel hideouts in a tribal region near the Afghan border, officials said.

The casualties occurred on Wednesday in the Bajaur region, where Pakistani troops launched a major offensive against Islamic militants in August.

"Twelve local and eight foreign militants including their important commanders were killed in the successful airstrike," a security official told AFP.

"The action was taken after observing militants' movements in Badan, the village of Taliban leader Maulvi Faqir Mohammad," the official added.

Mohammad is the deputy of Taliban warlord Baitullah Mehsud, whom Pakistan's previous government accused of masterminding the slaying of former premier Benazir Bhutto in a gun and suicide attack in December 2007.

A government official, Mohammad Jamil Khan, earlier said that 12 militants, including two foreigners were killed by helicopter gunships in the Badan area.

He did not disclose the nationality of the two "foreigners," a term used by Pakistan authorities for al-Qaeda militants.

The Pakistani military says more than 1,000 rebel fighters have been killed since it launched its offensive in Bajaur in early August, including al-Qaeda's operational commander in the region, Egyptian Abu Saeed Al-Masri.

Pakistan's tribal regions have been wracked by violence since thousands of Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels sneaked into the country after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

Violence linked to Pakistan's role in the "war on terror" has claimed the lives of more than 1,300 people in suicide and bomb attacks in the past year.

US asks allies to send troops to Afghanistan

AP, Ohrid, Macedonia

Defence Secretary Robert Gates yesterday urged Eastern European leaders to shift their military efforts from Iraq to Afghanistan, where their forces are more urgently needed.

Speaking at a meeting here of the Southeast European Defence Ministerial, Gates said that as the security situation in Iraq continues to improve, countries should consider filling the "urgent need" for trainers in Afghanistan.

"Your assistance will not only help Afghanistan better protect and care for its citizens, it will also reinforce your important role in insuring peace and stability around the globe," Gates said during a press conference with the Macedonian minister of defence.



Maldivians wait to cast their ballots outside a polling station in Male yesterday. The Maldives voted in its first multi-party presidential elections that could see Asia's longest-serving president ousted by a former political prisoner.

Invitation For Tender from the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Includes details for the LGED Bhaban, Agargaon Shere E Bangla Nagar project. Lists project information, tender details, and package information.

Bangladesh Submarine Cable Company Limited (BSCCL) Tender for valuation of Assets and Liabilities. Includes company details, tender information, and objectives of the assignment.

Security tightened in Agra after serial blast threat

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Agra

Security has been tightened at public places in Agra following a letter to authorities warning of serial blasts, including one at the Taj Mahal, police said yesterday.

The letter from someone claiming to be an area commander of the Indian Mujahideen terrorist group was received by Agra Cantonment railway station superintendent RC Meena on Tuesday.

"Even if it is a hoax or some kind of a prank, we cannot take it lightly. Accordingly, all precautions are being taken and we have stepped up vigilance," Senior Superintendent of Police Raghuvir Lal said.

The letter warns of serial blasts targeting the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Agra Cantonment railway station, Bankey Bihari temple in Vrindavan and Dan Ghati in Govardhan. The letter in Hindi is neatly written.

Pankaj Gangwar, senior divisional commissioner (security) of the railways, sent copies of the letter to district authorities and police officials.

Members of the hospitality and tourism industry expressed concern about the security situation and said the recent blasts in New Delhi had created anxiety, leading to cancellations.

"Tourism being a sensitive industry, a blast anywhere affects us," Tour Guide Association president Tahir Uddin Tahirsaid.

Myanmar junta steps up suppression

Says opposition

AP, Yangon

Myanmar's military rulers have stepped up suppression of political opponents ahead of the country's elections in 2010, an opposition party spokesman said Wednesday.

Nyan Win, of the National League for Democracy, said many party members arrested since last year were now facing trials, with at least 30 having been sentenced to at least 2 1/2 years in prison between September and early this month.

The regime has increased pressure on opponents and critics "so that they can manipulate the elections anyway they like," he said.

The junta has announced elections in 2010 as part of a "roadmap to democracy" that critics have slammed as a sham designed to cement the military's power. A military-backed constitution was approved in a national referendum in May, but the party charges that the vote was unfair.

International human rights groups say the junta now holds more than 2,100 political prisoners, compared with nearly 1,200 in June, 2007.

India considers polls in volatile Kashmir

Senior Indian election officials

Senior Indian election officials yesterday held talks in Kashmir on the prospects for polls in the region which has recently witnessed the largest protests against Indian rule for years.

A three-member team led by Chief Election Commissioner N. Gopalswami were briefed by state officials on the current law and order situation, a government spokesman said.

Indian Kashmir was put under federal rule in July following the collapse of the state government over a land row that triggered a revival of anti-India fervour in the insurgency-wracked region.

Elections are due before January 10 and Gopalswami's commission must decide whether to go ahead with a ballot or postpone until 2009.

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