

Bush signs Indo-US nuclear law

BJP, Left term N-deal defeat for India

AFP, PTI, Washington/ New Delhi

US President George W Bush on Wednesday signed legislation to enact a landmark US-India civilian nuclear agreement, celebrating "the growing ties between the world's two largest democracies."

"This agreement sends a signal to the world: Nations that follow the path to democracy and responsible behaviour will find a friend in the United States of America," Bush said at a lavish White House signing ceremony.

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee will visit Washington Friday to Washington so that he and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice can formally sign the accord itself, the US State Department announced.

Responding on predictable

lines to President George W Bush's assent to the bill on Indo-US nuclear deal, the BJP and Left parties yesterday said that history will prove that the accord was a "defeat" for India with Washington remaining "silent" on nuclear testing.

But the Congress hailed the signing of legislation into law by Bush, asserting that the Indian nuclear programme would be intact and future generations will not face power shortage.

"Bush is silent in his speech about the contentious issue of nuclear testing and the government has clearly failed in ensuring the sovereignty and nuclear independence for the country," BJP spokesperson Rajiv Pratap Rudy said after the US leader signed the bill into law.

The Left parties warned the deal would entail "huge costs" for India and was a result of "mutual desperation" on both sides.

The statement by Bush after signing the deal was "nothing but a device" to allay genuine fears over the deal, CPI-M General secretary Prakash Karat told PTI.

Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed the deal in July 2005, touching off a difficult battle with wary lawmakers on either side and critics who warn it undermines global efforts to curb the spread of nuclear know-how.

Evidently savouring the resulting diplomatic victory in the twilight of his term, the US president welcomed "the honour of signing legislation that builds on the growing ties between the world's two largest democracies."

The agreement offers India access to sophisticated US technology and cheap atomic energy in return for allowing UN inspections of some of its civilian nuclear facilities -- but not military nuclear sites.

Washington imposed a ban on US-India civilian nuclear trade after India's first nuclear test in 1974, but US officials have said a new approach is needed to help the world's largest democracy meet its booming energy needs at a time of skyrocketing oil prices and global warming fears.

US lawmakers attached safeguards on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons technology before passing it overwhelmingly last week and handing the increasingly unpopular Bush administration a foreign policy victory.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W Bush signs the United States-India Nuclear Cooperation Approval and Nonproliferation Enhancement Act in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC on Wednesday. Standing behind him are: (L-R) New York Democratic Representative Joseph Crowley and Eliot Engel, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Connecticut Democratic Senator Chris Dodd, Virginia Republican Senator John Warner and US Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman.

India bans exit poll till last day of assembly election

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has decided to ban publication and dissemination of exit polls till the last day of parliamentary and state assembly elections.

A proposal to this effect was taken at a meeting of the cabinet presided by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Wednesday.

"The restriction on telecast of exit polls would enable the people to exercise their right to vote without being influenced by the projection of telecast after one phase of voting is over and other phases of voting are yet to be completed", Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram told reporters.

While Lok Sabha polls are due by May next year, legislatures in six Indian states, including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi, are to go to poll by this year.

A bill to amend the Representation of People Act of 1951 for the curb on exit polls would be introduced in Parliament in its winter session later this month.

Time running out for McCain to turn election tide

AFP, Washington

After a lackluster debate, John McCain now has less than four weeks to turn the race for the White House around, as observers on Wednesday began to wonder aloud whether the Republican who once dubbed himself the comeback kid can win.

One day after McCain faced off in the second of three debates against Barack Obama, political observers said the exchange failed to up-end the front-runner status of his Democratic rival, as the contest ticks down to the November 4 vote.

"Despite John McCain's best efforts, the Arizona senator didn't knock Mr Obama from his cool evasion or even do much to rebut the Democrat's talking points," the conservative Wall Street Journal wrote the morning after the debate.

"This isn't enough to change the dynamics of the race."

Snap polls by US television networks awarded the debate -- the second of a trio of presidential clashes -- to Obama.

Democrats now are optimistic that -- with two of three rhetorical contests over and both won by Obama according to opinion polls -- the Illinois senator is an increasingly good bet to clinch the November 4 election.

"The race is over," crowed Howard Wolfson, a former spokesman for Senator Hillary Clinton, one of several Democratic rivals vanquished by Obama en route to the sealing nomination.

Longtime Washington pundit Roger Simon pronounced neither McCain nor Obama the winner, saying that, from his vantage point, both failed in "delivering a knock-out punch."

"The trouble for John McCain, however, is that he needed one," wrote Simon, a writer for The Politico daily newspaper.

US-Iraq security pact faces hurdles

AP, Baghdad

A US-Iraqi security agreement spelling out how American troops and contractors operate was supposed to be in place over the summer, but the thorniest issues remain unsettled and neither side is budging.

Time is running out. The deal must be finished and ratified by Iraq's parliament before Dec. 31, when the UN mandate authorizing the US military mission expires. Otherwise, there will be no legal basis for the US presence in Iraq.

For President Bush, some of the pressure to get a fast deal has faded since Iraq is no longer a dominant issue in the presidential campaign.

For the Iraqi leadership, however, political crosscurrents have grown more complicated because of upcoming provincial elections and strong Iranian opposition to any security agreement.

Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Iraqi Foreign

Minister Hoshiyar Zebari sought to put a favourable spin on the talks, telling reporters at a joint press conference in Baghdad this week that the two sides were close to a deal.

"There is a mutual desire to sign this agreement because it is necessary for Iraq's development, to safeguard oil resources, to enable Iraqi forces to handle security and to complete our national independence," President Jalal Talabani told state television Wednesday.

But negotiations were supposed to have been wrapped up in July. With the clock ticking, the two sides still cannot agree on two key issues: legal jurisdiction over US troops and contractors and a timeline for a US withdrawal.

The Iraqis insist on the right to try American troops accused of crimes at least when alleged offences are committed off US bases. The Iraqis want the last American soldiers to leave Iraq by the end of 2011 unless the Baghdad government asks them to stay.

US negotiators want the withdrawal tied to the security situation rather than dates. Both sides describe their positions as "red lines."

"The Americans show no interest in committing themselves to any deadline or timetable and they think that such process depends on the situation on the ground," Kurdish lawmaker Mahmoud Othman said.

Privately, Pentagon officials closely involved in the talks say they are not optimistic that a final deal will be clinched anytime soon. A top US official said there is even less reason for optimism now than in recent months.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to characterise the closed-door talks.

Iraqi officials familiar with the talks are no less pessimistic.

"Negotiations are focusing on a very hard stage," al-Maliki aide Sami al-Askari told The Associated Press. "I think it will be rejected by parliament as it stands now."

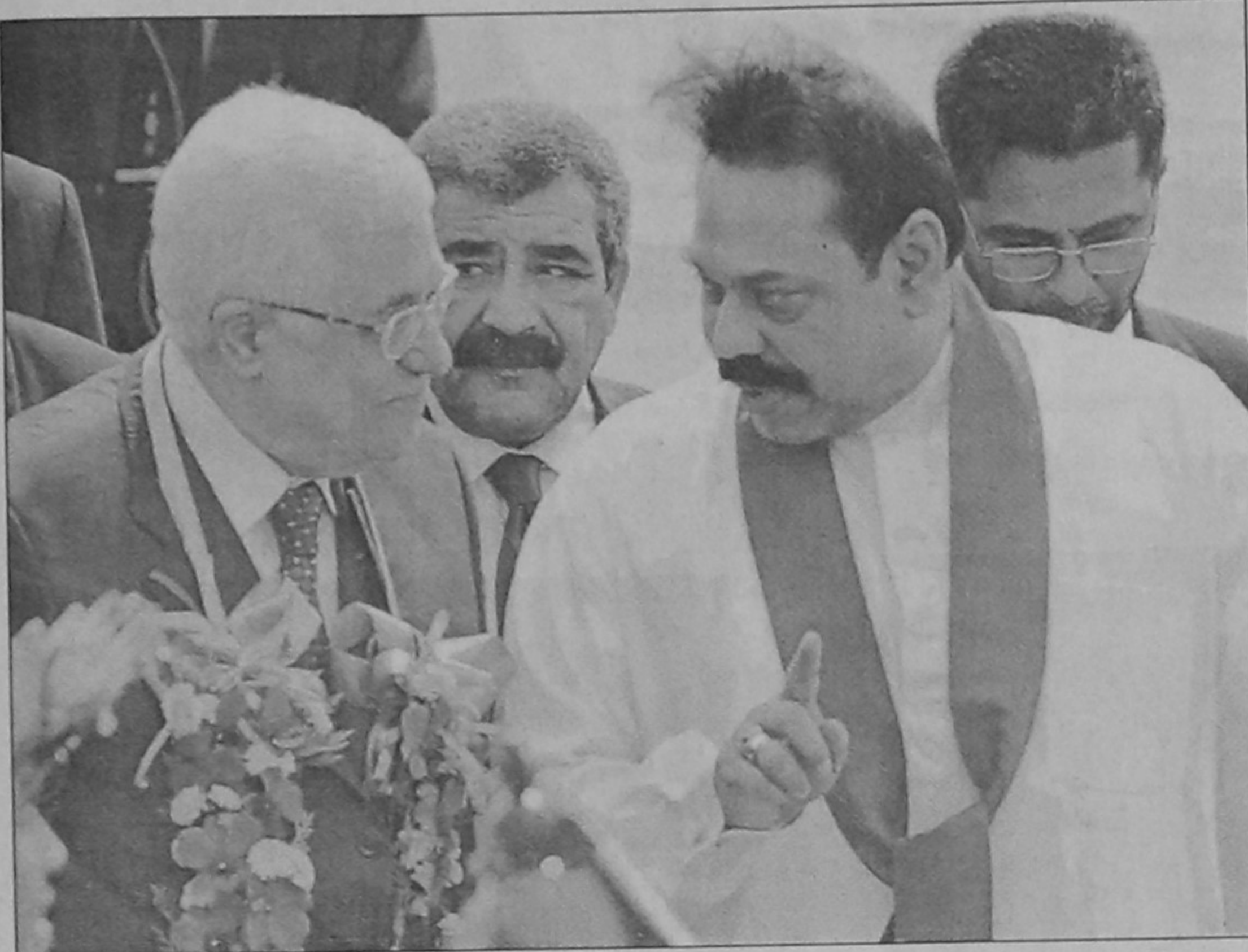


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (L) walks with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (R) on arrival at the Bandaranaike International Airport in Colombo yesterday. The Palestine leader arrived on a two-day visit to the island.

Sadr MP assassinated in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

A Shia radical MP was assassinated in a roadside bomb attack on Thursday in Baghdad's Shia stronghold of Sadr City, his Sadrist faction said.

"The political committee announces the death of Saleh al-Ogayly (MP) resulting from injuries sustained in a bomb attack in Baghdad today," a statement said.

At least one bystander was also killed in the attack, security officials said, adding that four people were wounded. The homemade bomb was planted on a parked motorcycle.

Security officials confirmed that the bomb had targeted Ogayly, a member of the parliamentary group of radical anti-US cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

They said a second roadside bombing killed a civilian and wounded four people, two of them policemen. Both attacks were in Sadr City, the impoverished north-eastern Baghdad district where two million people live.

Heavy fighting in Sadr City in March and April between Sadr's Mahdi Army militia and security forces left hundreds dead before a ceasefire went into effect in May.

Despite the truce, the district has seen frequent violence.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi man rushes a severely wounded girl to the Baquba central hospital, northeast of Baghdad yesterday after she was wounded in a roadside bomb. Abbas Khudair, a Sahwa leader in al-Uthaim area in northern Baquba, was killed along with his son, daughter and nephew in the bomb that targeted his car early Thursday.

N Korea prepares mass missile launches

AFP, Seoul

North Korea is preparing up to 10 more short-range missiles for a mass test-launch, South Korean news reports said Thursday, two days after the North fired at least one missile into the sea.

Chosun Ilbo newspaper, quoting a government source, said a US satellite had spotted the North readying about 10 short-range missiles for launch from Chodo, an island navy base off the west coast.

The source said the military is preparing KN-01 surface-to-ship and Styx ship-to-ship missiles for launching from Chodo and its surroundings into the Yellow Sea.

"If North Korea fires nuclear en masse, it can hardly be part of a routine exercise. Its intentions should be analysed in various ways," the source said.

South Korean intelligence authorities think North Korea may fire "more than five" of the missiles, Chosun said.

North Korea has banned shipping from sailing near Chodo until October 15, it added.

Seoul's Yonhap news agency also reported plans to fire up to 10 missiles and the declaration of an exclusion zone.

Neither the defence ministry nor the Joint Chiefs of Staff office in Seoul would comment on the reports.

The North fired up to two short-

range missiles into the Yellow Sea from Chodo on Tuesday in what Seoul officials described as "routine military exercises."

The North has carried out such short-range missile tests many times before. Seoul describes them as part of customary drills but analysts say they are sometimes timed to make a political point.

Friday is the anniversary of the North's ruling communist party. Analysts are closely watching the event to see if top leader Kim Jong-Il, who reportedly suffered a stroke in August, will appear.

And a six-nation nuclear disarmament agreement is deadlocked because of a dispute over verification of the North's nuclear programme.

Meanwhile, North Korea's naval command on Thursday accused South Korean ships of violating its territorial waters in the Yellow Sea and warned that escalating tensions could lead to a clash.

The warning came two days after the headline communist country fired short-range missiles in the Yellow Sea, the scene of bloody naval clashes in 1999 and 2002.

"The situation... has become so tense that a naval clash may break out due to such military provocations as the ceaseless infiltration of warships deep into the (North's) territorial waters," the state news agency KCNA quoted a naval spokesman as saying.

Thai court drops charges against protest leaders

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court dropped charges of insurrection yesterday against the main leaders of a protest movement bidding to topple the government, two days after the worst street unrest in Bangkok for 16 years.

The decision by the Appeals Court opens the way for them to surrender -- as they have promised to do -- but offers no long-term solution to the political turmoil hobbling the country.

It followed Tuesday's clashes between police and protesters, which left two people dead and hundreds injured, and left negotiations between the two sides in tatters with protest leaders vowing revenge.

"Seven leaders will surrender, but we will meet this afternoon to set the time and after that we will bail ourselves out to continue our fight," Suriyasai Katasila, one of the wanted leaders, told AFP.

Thousands of anti-government protesters on Tuesday marched to parliament to try to stop Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat delivering a policy address. Police moved in and the violence left 478 injured and two dead.

A court had issued arrest warrants for nine key leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy

(PAD) on August 27 -- a day after they stormed Government House -- and police had detained two of them.

The courts on Thursday threw out the arrest warrants on three serious charges including treason, and granted bail of 100,000 baht (2,900 dollars) and freed the two detained PAD leaders, Chamlong Srimuang and Chaiwat Sinuwong.

The Appeals Court decided that although the protest leaders committed illegal acts, "it is unreasonable to issue an arrest warrant on insurrection charges, thus the court revokes insurrection charges for all nine suspects."

Two less serious charges of illegal assembly and inciting unrest remain.

Somchai, meanwhile, announced that the government would investigate Tuesday's violence, when police fired tear gas on the protesters trying to besiege parliament, and some retaliated with gunfire.

"The committee will investigate who is right and who is wrong, where the problem occurred and who resorted to violence first so that the public will be accurately informed," he told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

He said he hoped it would prove the government had no role in the

unrest.

"The government does not intend to harm anybody," he added.

Political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak said the court ruling strengthened the hand of the protesters, who launched their campaign in May claiming the ruling party was too close to ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

"If they're on bail they can keep doing the act and still be under the law. It's a big game for them because now people cannot accuse them of being above the law," Thitinan said.

In a potent symbol of the scale of the crisis, Somchai's cabinet met in an airport terminal converted for their use while the PAD protesters occupy their offices.

The PAD claims the current government is running the nation on behalf of Thaksin -- Somchai is his brother-in-law -- and objects to its plans to amend the constitution, brought in following the September 2006 coup that toppled Thaksin.

Somchai's People Power Party in December won the first elections since the 2006 coup, but has been beset by protests and court decisions against it, one of which removed his predecessor Samak Sundaravej from office last month.

Ukraine to hold parliamentary polls on Dec 7: President

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine will hold snap parliamentary elections on December 7, President Viktor Yushchenko announced Thursday, after the collapse of the ruling pro-West coalition.

In a decree posted on his official website, Yushchenko "set parliamentary elections for December 7, 2008."

Yushchenko on Wednesday announced the dissolution of parliament in a televised address after a failed bid to re-establish a coalition with his pro-West partner Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

The crisis has raised concerns in the West that pro-Moscow parties may come to power, casting doubt on a bid by the former Soviet republic of 47 million to strengthen ties with Washington and Brussels.

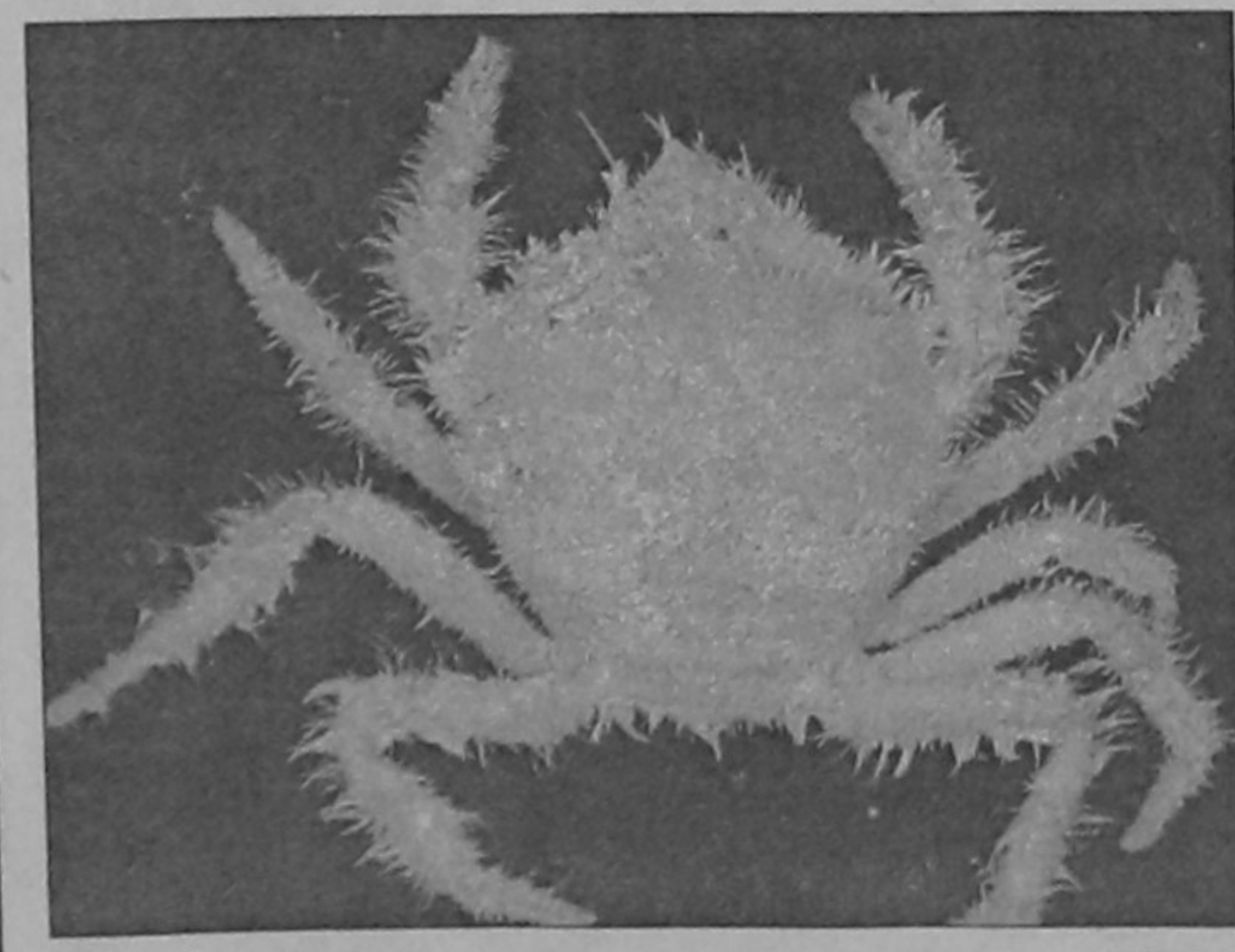


PHOTO: AFP

An undated handout photo obtained on October 8, 2008 shows a new species of Trichopeltation crab in the Huon Commonwealth Marine Reserve off southern Tasmania as marine research voyages revealed 274 species new to science which were brought to the surface and analysed, along with 86 species previously unknown in Australian waters and 242 previously studied species.

Hundreds of new marine species discovered

AFP, Sydney

Hundreds of new marine species and previously uncharted undersea mountains and canyons have been discovered in the depths of the Southern Ocean, Australian scientists said Wednesday.

A total of 274 species of fish, ancient corals, molluscs, crustaceans and sponges new to science were found in icy waters up to 3,000 metres (9,800 feet) deep among extinct volcanoes, they said.

The scientists mapped undersea mountains up to 500 metres high and canyons larger than the Grand Canyon for the first time, the government's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

(CSIRO) said.

The finds were made in marine reserves 100 nautical miles south of the Australian island of Tasmania during two CSIRO voyages in November 2006 and April 2007 using new sonar and video technology as well as sea-floor sampling.

Announcing the discoveries in the Tasmanian capital Hobart, CSIRO scientist Kate Wilson said more was known about the surface of Mars than the depths of the world's oceans.

"In Australian waters, for example, more than 40 percent of the creatures brought to the surface by our scientists on a voyage of discovery have never been seen before," she said.

A total of 123 underwater mountains were found, said CSIRO specialist Nic Bax, noting they were home to thousands of deep-sea animals.

"They're really what we call the rainforests of the deep, they provide an area where we get a very wide range of species collected and that's really unique in the deep-sea environment," he said.

In the cold depths of the Southern Ocean "things grow quite slowly so when you're looking at a coral which is maybe two metres high, it may also be 300 years old or more," said Bax.

"So you end up seeing some very old things down there. You can see corals which probably existed 2,000 years ago down there."

Fatah-Hamas talks set for Oct 25 in Cairo

AFP, Cairo

Fatah and Hamas will meet in Cairo on October 25 for Egyptian-mediated talks aimed at forming a Palestinian transitional government acceptable to the rival factions, Hamas said yesterday.

"Fatah and Hamas will meet on October 25 in Cairo under Egyptian mediation to resolve their differences on how to reach reconciliation and end the current Palestinian divisions," senior Hamas official Mahmud al-Zahar told AFP.

Zahar was speaking after talks on Wednesday with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, the latest in a series of such meetings with a dozen Palestinian factions, including the secular Fatah party of president Mahmud Abbas.

Egypt has been acting as a mediator between Fatah and Hamas after the Islamist party, which won a majority in parliamentary elections in 2006, seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, routing forces loyal to Fatah.

The Egyptian proposal includes a transitional government made up of ministers acceptable to all factions and a restructuring of Palestinian security forces with Arab oversight.

The proposal also provides for new parliamentary and presidential elections.

Hamas has said it will not recognise Palestinian Authority president Abbas after his mandate ends in January. But on Wednesday, Hamas official Khalil al-Haya said the Islamist party would be willing to place "elections on the table for negotiation."