

# US close to taking North Korea off terror list

AP, Washington

The Bush administration is nearing a decision to remove North Korea from a terrorism blacklist and may do so as early as Friday in a bid to salvage faltering nuclear disarmament talks. The Associated Press has learned.

US officials said Thursday that no final decision had been made but diplomats briefed on the matter told the AP that they believe an announcement that North Korea will be tentatively taken off the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism is imminent.

The delisting depends on North Korea agreeing to a plan to verify an account of its nuclear activity that it submitted over the summer, the diplomats said. North Korea would be put back on the list if it doesn't comply with the plan and abandon nuclear arms, they said.

The diplomats spoke on condi-

tion of anonymity ahead of an expected announcement, which would follow meetings last week in Pyongyang between North Korean officials and US envoy Christopher Hill as well as days of intense debate in Washington.

The move would be a last-ditch attempt to save a disarmament agreement that has frayed badly in recent months as North Korea moves to restart its main nuclear plant and takes other provocative steps such as expelling UN inspectors and launching short-range missiles.

Saving the deal and getting Pyongyang to follow through would also be a major foreign policy success for the administration in its waning months.

But opponents of the deal, mainly conservative hawks in and out of the administration, say removing the North from the terrorism list now would be a reward for bad behaviour from a country

that cannot be trusted.

North Korea had disabled its Yongbyon nuclear facility under the initial phases of the deal but since August has been reversing that because the United States has not removed it from the terror list as it agreed after North Korea provided a declaration of its atomic programme in June.

The US has said it will fulfil the obligation only when North Korea accepts a plan to verify that accounting.

But while he was in North Korea, Hill proposed a face-saving compromise under which the North would be provisionally removed from the terrorism list as soon as it deposits with China an agreement on verification, according to US officials.

China, the chair of the six-nation nuclear negotiations, would then announce that the North Koreans were on board, allowing

Pyongyang to claim that Washington moved first, they said.

Despite signs the delisting is close, details of what North Korea is prepared to allow in terms of inspections of its nuclear sites are unclear. The specifics of Hill's discussions with the North are closely held in Washington among a tight circle of top Bush aides, officials said.

White House press secretary Dana Perino said agreement on a "verification protocol" remained the key to taking North Korea off the list. "If we can get a verification protocol that we are satisfied with, then we would be able to fulfil our side of the bargain," she said.

Later, amid a swirl of speculation in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo that the delisting would come on Friday, National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe would say only that "no final decision has been made yet."

## US election officials deny illegally purging voters

AP, New York

A newspaper report Thursday said tens of thousands of eligible voters have been removed from rolls or blocked from registering in at least six swing states. Election officials lined up to defend their registration procedures and said they had done nothing wrong.

The New York Times based its findings on reviews of state records and Social Security data, and said it had identified apparent problems in Colorado, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Nevada and North Carolina.

Two states had purged voters, the Times said. Ohio and three other states were cited only for sending several requests for voter registration verifications to the Social Security Administration.

The Times said voters appear to have been purged by mistake and not because of any intentional violations by election officials or coordinated efforts by any party. It says that some states are improperly using Social Security data to verify new voters' registration applications, and that others might have broken rules that govern removing voters from the rolls within 90 days of a federal election.



South Korean protesters burn portraits of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il during a rally against North Korea's nuclear programmes in Seoul yesterday. The US is close to removing North Korea from its terrorism blacklist in hopes of saving a crumbling nuclear disarmament deal, according to several media reports on Friday.

## Cyprus rivals in bid to speed up peace talks

AFP, Nicosia

Rival Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot leaders held private talks on Friday in a bid to speed up slow-moving negotiations on reunifying the divided Mediterranean island.

President Dimitris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat met alone for a hour before being joined by their delegations for a further two hours of discussions, UN mediators said.

"The leaders had a productive meeting. They had a one-hour private meeting at the beginning and they have agreed to meet on a weekly basis," UN envoy Alexander Downer said after the talks.

There had been criticism of the pace of the negotiations launched on September 3 after the two leaders failed to meet between September 18 and Friday. Christofias travelled to New York for the UN General Assembly and also made a state visit to Bulgaria.

Downer said the two leaders had agreed to meet again on Monday to continue their discussions.

"The leaders today had further discussions on the powers of a federal government and they made progress," he said.

"They also began discussions on the structure of a federal executive. Both sides made proposals and these discussions will continue on Monday."



Anti-government protesters shout slogans during a protest inside Government House in Bangkok yesterday. The leaders of mounting protests in Thailand were granted bail after turning themselves in on charges related to their campaign to topple the government, one of the leaders said.

## 7 Thai protest leaders freed from custody

AP, Bangkok

Seven leaders of a protest movement seeking to unseat Thailand's government were freed from police custody yesterday just hours after turning themselves in on criminal charges, as other opponents of the prime minister called for his resignation or a military coup.

The leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy surrendered after a court on Thursday dropped insurrection charges against them but retained charges of inciting a public disturbance and illegal assembly, which carry prison terms of up to seven and three years respectively.

Two other leaders of the alliance who had earlier been apprehended by police, Chamlong Srimuang and Chaiwat Sinsuwan, were freed Thursday. All were released on the guarantees of senators in lieu of bail.

Chamlong called on Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat to resign and pave the way for an interim administration that would carry out political reforms and lead the country out of near-paralysis.

The alliance, which has led

months of anti-government protests, seeks to roll back Western-style democracy, saying it makes the country susceptible to corruption.

Chamlong rejected calls by some, including former Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, to end the strife through military intervention.

"A military coup will only cause more damage to the country," Chamlong said.

The alliance had welcomed a military coup in 2006 that ousted then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra after spearheading similar protests against him.

Somchai said he was seeking the advice of prominent figures about what course to take when asked by reporters whether he would resign or dissolve Parliament.

On Tuesday, violent clashes between police and protesters injured 478 people mostly protesters including 85 who were hospitalized, according to medical authorities. Three people were killed, including a 45-year-old woman who succumbed to her injuries late Thursday, and a man who died in what appeared to be a related incident.

The alliance continued to roar its defiance of the authorities and challenged them to a showdown. It accuses Somchai of being a proxy for Thaksin, a former telecommunications billionaire who was ousted for alleged corruption and misuse of power. Somchai is Thaksin's brother-in-law.

"It is the final war. We cannot lose. If we lose, the country will be gone," top protest leader Sondhi Limthongkul said Thursday from the grounds of the prime minister's office compound, which the protesters have occupied since Aug. 26.

The protest alliance derides Thailand's rural majority who gave landslide election victories to Thaksin and his allies as susceptible to vote-buying and too poorly educated to responsibly choose their representatives.

It wants Thailand to abandon one-man, one-vote democracy, and instead have a mixed system in which some representatives are chosen by certain professions and social groups. They have not explained exactly how such a system would work or what would make it less susceptible to manipulation.

## About 100 people missing in Gulf of Aden: UN

AFP, Geneva

About 100 people have been reported missing in the Gulf of Aden after being forced overboard by smugglers on their way to Yemen from war-torn Somalia, the United Nations refugee agency said Friday.

The latest figure brings the total number of people still missing in the Gulf to 365 so far this year.

"UNHCR and its partners are searching for about 100 people reported missing in the Gulf of Aden after being forced overboard by smugglers off the coast of Yemen," UN High Commissioner for Refugees spokesman Ron Redmond told journalists.

According to the 47 survivors, out of 150 passengers who departed from the Somali port of Marera, all but 12 of the passengers were forced overboard about five kilometres (three miles) off Yemen's coast, said Redmond.

The 12 were placed in a smaller boat while the others had to swim to shore.



The world's tallest man, China's Bao Xishun, looks at his new-born son "Tianyou", who weighs in at 4.2 kilograms (9.3 pounds) and 56 centimetres (22 inches) long, slightly taller than most Chinese newborns, in Zunhua, northern China's Hebei province on October 2.

## Chinese giant becomes world's tallest dad

AFP, Beijing

The world's tallest man, China's Bao Xishun, has become a father but his normal-sized son could have trouble filling his dad's big shoes.

Bao, who stands 2.36 metres (seven feet nine inches) tall, and his wife, Xia Shujun, celebrated the birth of the boy last week in the northern province of Hebei, Xinhua news agency said.

The baby, named "Tianyou", weighed in at 4.2 kilograms (9.3 pounds) and was 56 centimetres (22 inches) long, slightly taller than most Chinese newborns, it said.

Bao, a herdsman from the Inner Mongolia region of northern China, captured the hearts of many worldwide two years ago when he launched a search for a bride who would measure up.

After a lifetime as a bachelor, Bao, who is a celebrity in China, heard back from more than 20 interested women from across the country.

His search ended in July 2007, when after a one-month courtship, he married Xia, who barely reaches his elbow and who, at 29, is about half Bao's age.

Bao is believed to be 56. The gentle giant also made headlines in 2006 when he was called upon to use his long arms to pull plastic rubbish from the stomachs of two ailing dolphins at an aquarium in northeastern China.

## 6m Ethiopians need emergency aid: Charity

AFP, Addis Ababa

The number of Ethiopians in need of emergency assistance has risen to 6.4 million, the charity Oxfam said Friday, warning of a disaster if donors did not respond.

"The number of Ethiopians needing emergency assistance has leapt by 40 percent from 4.6 million to 6.4 million people since June," the British organisation said in a statement, quoting UN and Ethiopian government statistics.

"At the same time cereal rations to those needing assistance have been reduced by a third because not enough food is reaching the country," it said, adding that according to the UN the total aid effort was currently under-funded to the tune of 260 million dollars.

Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country with around 80 million inhabitants and has been badly affected by droughts, civil conflict and rising food prices.

"The revised numbers of those needing emergency assistance is likely to be a conservative estimate and does not include the 7.2 million Ethiopians so chronically poor that they receive cash or food aid from the government every year," Oxfam said.

## Immunity still a problem despite US concessions

Says Maliki

AFP, Najaf

Washington has made "huge concessions" in a controversial military pact still under negotiation, but immunity issues remain a problem, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said on Friday.

Among sticking points is a demand that neither foreign troops nor civilian Americans should enjoy legal immunity while in Iraq, Maliki said.

"Washington has made huge concessions, but some points about immunity for troops and civil Americans are still pending," the prime minister told reporters after a meeting in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most respected Shia cleric.

Washington and Baghdad are negotiating a security pact to map the future of US forces in Iraq after

the UN mandate expires in December this year.

The UN document acts as the legal framework for the presence of foreign forces in the violence-wracked country.

Other issues delaying a final deal between the US and Iraq include questions of legal jurisdiction, the detention of Iraqi nationals and who will lead military operations from next year.

Nevertheless Maliki says the new draft pact has reached the "final stages".

Among both weak and positive points, he believes the most important issue dealt with is the fixed timeline for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

Maliki recalled that the arrangement envisages US troops pulling back from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009 and withdrawing

completely from the country by December 31, 2011.

The proposals have drawn heavy criticism from many segments of Iraq's religiously mixed society, especially that of the parliamentary Shia faction led by radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who advocates the immediate withdrawal of the US.

Asked if Sistani would agree to the deal, Maliki said Sistani will accept an accord if it wins Iraqi lawmakers' stamp of approval.

"If parliament and the government agree he would not oppose the agreement," the prime minister said.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said on Tuesday that a deal between the US and Iraq is "very close". His comments were echoed by visiting US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte.

## Pakistan, Iran back bilateral gas pipeline

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and Iran yesterday said they were willing to undertake bilaterally a stalled multi-billion-dollar gas pipeline even if India does not join the project.

The pipeline, to carry gas from Iran to Pakistan and India, was first mooted in 1994 but has been delayed by repeated disputes over prices and transit fees.

The foreign ministers of Pakistan and Iran met in Islamabad and announced that the 7.5 billion dollar pipeline could start without India's involvement.

"Iran is willing to undertake the project bilaterally," Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told reporters after talks with Manouchehr Mottaki.

Mottaki endorsed the plan, saying that "India may join the project whenever it is ready for

this."

Talks on the project to supply gas to India and to Pakistan through the 2,600-kilometre (1,600-mile) pipeline have been hobbled by tensions between the two rival nuclear powers.

India, which imports more than 70 percent of its energy needs, has been seeking new supplies of oil and gas while ramping up domestic production to sustain its booming economy.

New Delhi has also been under pressure from the United States not to do business with Iran, viewed in Washington as a state sponsor of terrorism that is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons.

Qureshi previously guaranteed Pakistan would "provide fool-proof security" for the pipeline, which is expected to pass through Pakistan's volatile Baluchistan region.

## McCain losing ground with working-class whites in states

AP, Kittanning

The steel mills and coal mines of western Pennsylvania helped fuel the nation's economic engine. Today, old factory shells and boarded-up storefronts stand as bleak reminders of those once-prosperous times.

But the voters in working-class enclaves such as this still are a sought-after prize in presidential politics, and many are belatedly coming around to Democratic nominee Barack Obama.

In the Democratic primaries, working-class whites consistently backed Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton. Later polls showed them overwhelmingly favouring Republican nominee John McCain.

Now, driven by fears that their personal finances could further deteriorate, many see Obama as the better choice, their thinking in some

cases driven more by concern about how McCain would handle the economy than any growing admiration for his rival.

"I don't know that there's anything I particularly like about him (Obama), but I dislike McCain, and I dislike the way the country is, and Republicans need to change," said lifelong Republican Ruth Ann Michel, 64, a retiree shopping in a market in Butler on a recent day. She said her vote for Obama would be her first for a Democratic presidential candidate.

While talk in these parts is mostly about the economy, a prominent if not unspoken subtext is race. A study of the impact of racial attitudes on the election conducted by The Associated Press with Yahoo News and Stanford University found that whites without a college education were much more likely to hold negative views of blacks than those with a college education.



A woman holds a Palestinian flag and flashes a victory sign as an Israeli soldier and a policewoman stand by during a demonstration against the construction of Israel's controversial separation barrier in the village of Maasarah near the West Bank town of Bethlehem yesterday.