



US President Barack Obama waves to the crowd after speaking at Hradcany Square near Prague Castle in Prague, Czech Republic yesterday. Obama pledged Sunday to lead the quest for a world without nuclear weapons, denouncing "fatalism" over proliferation and calling for North Korea to be punished for its rocket launch.

Obama launches effort to reduce nuclear arms

EU urged to accept Turkey as member

AP, Prague

President Barack Obama yesterday launched an effort to rid the world of nuclear weapons, calling them "the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War" and saying the US has a moral responsibility to lead as the only nation to ever use one.

In a speech driven with fresh urgency by North Korea's rocket launch just hours early, Obama said the US would "immediately and aggressively" seek ratification of a comprehensive ban on testing nuclear weapons. He said the US would host a summit within the next year on reducing and eventually eliminating nuclear weapons, and he called for a global effort to

secure nuclear material.

"Some argue that the spread of these weapons cannot be checked that we are destined to live in a world where more nations and more people possess the ultimate tools of destruction," Obama said to a bustling crowd in an old square outside the Prague Castle gates.

"This fatalism is a deadly adversary," he said. "For if we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable."

Obama targeted his comments directly at North Korea at one point, which launched a rocket late Saturday night in defiance of the international community. The president was awoken by an aide and told of the news, which occurred in the

early morning hours in Prague.

Meanwhile, US President is urging the European Union to accept Turkey as a member, saying it would be a positive sign to the Muslim world.

Obama spoke Sunday at a luncheon for leaders of the EU's 27 nations in Prague. He said the West should seek greater cooperation and closer ties with Islamic nations. He said letting Turkey into the EU would be an important sign of those efforts.

France, Austria and other nations oppose Turkey's long-running efforts to join the European Union. EU members have urged Turkey to do more to guarantee minority rights, curb powers of its military and pass new rights for trade unions.

US 'now ready to lead' on climate change

Says Obama

AFP, Prague

US President Barack Obama promised on Sunday to take the lead in global efforts to tackle climate change, which Europe has long accused Washington of failing to address seriously.

"To protect our planet, now is the time to change the way that we use energy," he told a crowd gathered at Prague Castle for his only public speech during his maiden tour of Europe.

"Together we must confront climate change by ending the world's dependency on fossil fuels by tapping the power from the sources of energy like the wind and the sun and calling upon all nations to do their part," he said.

"And I pledge to you that in this global effort the US is now

ready to lead." Obama was speaking ahead of the new president's first EU-US summit, with European leaders eager for signs that Washington is willing to play a new role in cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

Under the leadership of George W. Bush, European leaders were often exasperated by the US failure to commit itself to climate change targets, especially because Europe has set ambitious targets for cutting greenhouse gases.

Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and Spanish counterpart Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, whose countries are next in line to assume the EU presidency, are set to head the debate on climate change, according to diplomats.

World leaders ponder how to punish N Korea

AP, Seoul

North Korea has once again created an international crisis by launching a rocket, once again thumbing its nose at a world community wondering how to deal with the rogue communist state.

The prospect of UN sanctions? As the communist government and other renegade states have discovered over the years, there are always ways around those a recent international report says the ones imposed against the North in 2006 after it conducted a nuclear test had had little effect.

Military action? Not wise against an unpredictable country that has threatened to use nuclear weapons. China, its closest ally and neighbour, is eager to maintain the North as a buffer with democratic South Korea and has been urging calm by all parties to avoid raising tensions any higher.

So after last-minute pleas failed and the North sent a multistage, long-range rocket off a launch pad on its northeast coast Sunday, the question is what the rest of the world can and will do about it.

The North said it was putting a satellite into orbit. The US, South Korea and Japan think the

communist country was really testing long-range missile technology a move they warned would violate a UN Security Council resolution banning the North from ballistic activity.

Japan immediately requested an emergency Security Council meeting amid talk of strong punishment and hope for a united response. US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has promised Security Council "consequences."

But China has veto power on the council and has watered down sanctions in the past. While Russia, which also has veto power, seems to be inching closer to the US on the issue in a goodwill move, Moscow also is likely to prefer a mild rebuke it doesn't have much influence on its former ally, but it has been reluctant to criticise Pyongyang in the past, fearing it could lose whatever small leverage it has.

Beijing isn't likely to support tougher action because it doesn't believe such tactics have much effect on Pyongyang, according to Shi Yinhong, professor of international relations at People's University in Beijing.

Beijing may be further constrained by a desire to avoid spoiling the atmosphere for commemorations of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the communist neighbours, Shi said.



Conservative activists burn a model of a North Korean missile and portraits of its leader Kim Jong-il near the US embassy in Seoul yesterday during a protest rally against launching of a long-range rocket.



Handout photo shows supporters of the Party of the Functional Groups (Golkar) waving flags and shouting slogans in Bogor, West Java yesterday during the final day of campaign rally. Indonesians head to polls with a song and dance in the third national legislative elections since the fall of the 32-year Suharto military dictatorship in 1998, the country's latest chance to prove that its 11-year old 'Reformasi' movement of democratic change is on track.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Indonesians lose faith in Islamic parties

AFP, Jakarta

As Indonesia heads to legislative elections this week, Islamic parties in the world's largest Muslim-majority country are facing the daunting prospect of their worst election showing yet.

Despite efforts to project a modern image, opinion polls are showing sliding support for Muslim parties -- and the grinding to a halt of years of apparently resurgent political Islam since dictator Suharto's fall in 1998.

With growth in Southeast Asia's largest economy slowing, analysts say Islamic parties' moral message is being overshadowed by voters' more earthly concerns.

"I don't care if the parties and candidates are religious. I'm choosing people to run a country, not a mosque," 45-year-old Jakarta shop assistant Mohammad told AFP.

"You can't pray away a bad economy, unemployment, poverty and crime."

That appears to be a belief shared by many of Indonesia's 171 million voters, around 90 percent of whom are Muslim.

While Islamic parties won 38 percent of the vote in the

last elections, in 2004, a recent survey showed the combined support of the country's half a dozen Muslim parties had slipped down to around 24 percent.

Among those feeling the pinch is the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), an offshoot of the banned Egyptian Islamist organisation Muslim Brotherhood, which just a few years ago was considered the rising star of Indonesian politics.

Now, the PKS is just trying to look cool.

When the party staged a massive rally in the capital last week, party president Tifatul Sembiring crooned on stage alongside dreadlocked band members.

The display is nothing novel for an Indonesian election, where karaoke is a more common fixture of campaigning than policy debate, but for the usually dour PKS it is an attempt to soften an image of intolerance.

The party was a key backer of a much-criticised anti-pornography law passed last year, which is widely seen as a threat to cultural traditions and non-Muslim minorities.

"The PKS insulted us. Just

wait and see, we won't vote for them," said Mas Nanu Muda, a practitioner of the traditional "Jaipong" dance recently criticised by party grandees as being too erotic.

"Our party is not fundamentalist, but moderate. A majority of voters are Muslims so they'll vote for us," PKS president Sembiring said.

The PKS, which got 7.34 percent of the vote in 2004, had boasted that it would win 20 percent this time. Polls suggest however that it will be lucky to gain five percent, a result that would be nothing short of a humiliation.

The problem for Indonesia's Islamic parties -- none of which advocate an Islamic state or the widespread introduction of Islamic law -- is that they have failed to make the case that they can be trusted with practical issues.

"The issue isn't about having an Islamic state or a secular state. The hot issue is about the economy. When people are occupied by economic questions they become more rational and they compromise about religion," Indonesian Survey Institute researcher Dodi Ambaridi said.

'Asia forking out on defence despite slowdown'

AFP, Singapore

Increased military spending by China and India is forcing other Asia-Pacific countries to modernise their armed forces despite the severe impact of the global financial crisis, experts say.

Data from defence research firm Jane's Information Group estimates total military spending in the region rising year-on-year -- from about 220 billion dollars in 2008 to 239 billion dollars this year and higher still in 2010.

Those figures include exter-

nal defence and homeland security and cover a region stretching from Central Asia to Australia.

"India and China are forcing the countries to think very hard strategically about their defence capabilities," Jon Grevatt, a regional defence specialist with Jane's, told AFP from Bangkok.

He said that although money is tight across the region, "the pressure of not spending on defence is very high due to the considerable military influence that China and India are assuming in this part of the world."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Rocket a DPRK ploy to draw attention

AP, Seoul

With North Korea's rocket launch, Kim Jong Il has the world exactly where he wants it: with all eyes on Pyongyang and its defiance of demands by the US, South Korea and Japan to cancel the firing.

The leaders of those nations warned that a launch would come at a high price, including possible punishment by the UN Security Council, which banned the North in 2006 from testing ballistic missiles the same technology it used in the communications satellite launch.

For the North Korean dictator, the risk of censure may well be worth it. It's

exactly the attention Kim is looking for as he looks to consolidate his power base at home and seeks to wrangle aid and other concessions from the new US president.

The 67-year-old communist leader is scheduled Thursday to preside over his first parliamentary session since disappearing from the public eye for several weeks beginning last August.

Kim is believed to have suffered a stroke so serious it prevented him from appearing at a military parade celebrating North Korea's milestone 60th anniversary, a marked absence that prompted fears of a succession crisis in the totalitarian nation of 23 million people.

With the North built on a cult of personality encompassing Kim and his father, national founder Kim Il Sung, the regime denied rumours that diabetes or a stroke had struck Kim, a man credited in state media with such physical talent that holes-in-one are routine when he golfs.

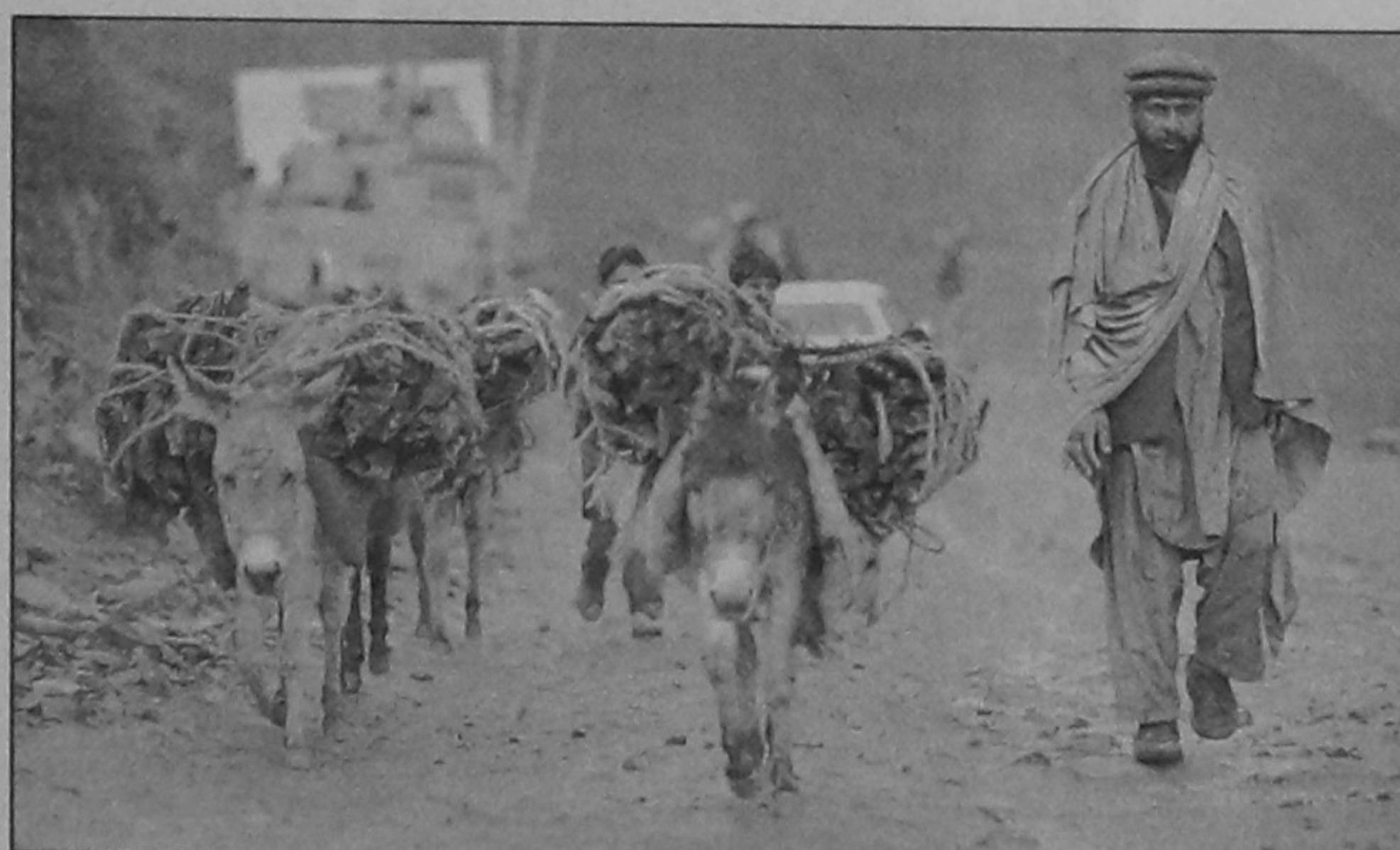
But the top brass in Pyongyang who no doubt took over for Kim when he was bedridden are clearly spooked and want to show North Koreans, and the world, that Kim is back in charge.

None of Kim's three sons is considered polished enough to take the family dynasty into a third generation, so the "Dear Leader" who has never inspired the reverence his father com-

manded knows he has to foster unity.

The satellite launch also provides a propaganda coup for Kim by pushing the North ahead in the space race with South Korea, which plans to put its own satellite into orbit later this year. Inter-Korean relations are at their lowest point in a decade, and missiles is one of the only areas where the North can claim a lead over the far more economically strong South.

But Kim's main audience is President Barack Obama. After eight years of a hard-line Bush administration, Pyongyang may harbour hopes of a return to the relatively warmer ties of the Clinton presidency.



An Afghan farmer herds his donkeys loaded with firewood near the Dokalam border post in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province on Friday. US President Barack Obama, unveiling his new strategy for the dragging Afghan war last month, put Pakistan at the heart of the fight to defeat al-Qaeda and vowed to boost US aid and assistance to the South Asian nation.

Cambodian border village in ruins after clashes

AFP, Preah Vihear

Lifting out blackened jewellery and bottles of whiskey, Cambodian troops comb through the wreckage of a village destroyed in a bitter battle with neighbouring Thailand.

Villagers have fled the area near the 11th-century Preah Vihear temple since troops from both sides traded gun and rocket fire on Friday, leaving two Thai soldiers dead and another nine wounded.

"Thai soldiers fired many rockets into the market so that it was burned down," said Cambodian soldier Kim Chantha, 49, as he sat next to the smouldering site at the base of the temple, cradling his AK-47 rifle.

"We rushed to put out the fire

when it first started on the thatched roof of a house, but we didn't have time because Thai soldiers kept firing machineguns and a lot of rockets toward the market," he added.

Many troops sifted through the scattered corrugated steel left from the gutted market and homes.

Hundreds of villagers who lived here were evacuated to a school 20 kilometres (12 miles) away from the site. The Cambodian government said they would be provided with new plots of land further from disputed territory.

"We are not afraid, but authorities evacuated us here. We don't know when they will allow us to go back," said Seng Kimlong, 25, who fled with his wife and three-year-old son.