

America Seeking Nuclear Superiority

MOSCOW, Feb. 21--Russia's foreign minister said that Moscow perceives the establishment of US missile defense sites in Europe as a signal that the United States wants to gain a nuclear superiority over Russia and said that the two nations need to negotiate new arms control agreements to strengthen mutual trust, AP reported.

Sergey Lavrov, speaking in an interview published Wednesday in the daily *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, dismissed Washington's claim that its plan to deploy 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic was directed to counter a missile threat from Iran.

"If they talk about potential threats coming from Iran or North Korea, missile defense elements should be located in a different place," Lavrov

said. "We can't help noting that these facilities would be capable of intercepting missiles launched from Russia."

He said that while "there is no talk about us launching the missiles," the deployment of US missile defenses in Europe could encourage the United States to think in terms of getting a nuclear superiority over Russia.

"Since protection from the first strike would be guaranteed, as American strategists apparently expect, another temptation arises--to be the first to launch a strike, aware that a chance has emerged to go unpunished," Lavrov said.

The statement was one of the bluntest signals yet of a growing distrust between Moscow and Washington, fueled by differences over NATO's eastward expansion, different approach to global



Sergey Lavrov

crises and US concerns about Russia's democracy record.

At a security conference in Munich earlier this month, Russia's President Vladimir Putin criticized US foreign policy in angry comments that shocked Western governments.

He accused Washington of uncontained use of force worldwide and of triggering a global arms race.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21--Foreign terror suspects held at the US-run prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, are barred from using the US court system to challenge their detentions, a federal appeals court ruled Tuesday.

The Washington DC Circuit Court rejected the detainees' argument they were not covered by legislation passed last year that barred designated "enemy combatants" from challenging their detention in the US court system, reported AFP.

"Their arguments are creative but not cogent," the court said in a 2-1 ruling likely to go before the US Supreme Court. "To accept them would be to defy the will of Congress."

The ruling was the latest chapter in a national debate over the treatment of Guantanamo

Gitmo Detainees Cannot Use US Court System

inmates that has pitted concerns over security after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks against the need to uphold civil liberties.

The focus of the debate has been President George W. Bush's move to designate terror suspects "enemy combatants" and hold them in Guantanamo for years without charge pending appearances before military tribunals.

The Supreme Court ruled in June 2006 that the tribunals were illegal because they were not authorized by Congress--an omission the Republican-controlled legislature remedied with legislation passed four months later.

But the detainees held at the US naval base in Guantanamo, which currently has some 400 inmates, argued they were not covered by provisions of the



One of the Al-Qaeda detainees (2nd l) wearing an orange jump suit can be seen surrounded by heavy security at the Guantanamo Naval Base, US, Jan. 17.

Military Commission Act that barred all suspects from challenging their detention in civilian courts.

The appeals court rebuffed as "nonsense" the detainees' contention

the law had a loophole that allowed them to file so-called habeas corpus petitions that contest detention without formal charges or proof.

The appeals court also rejected the detainees'

right to claim that the act violated the US Constitution that said habeas corpus could be suspended only in times of rebellion or other extraordinary circumstances.

Lebanon Fires at Israeli Planes

BEIRUT, Lebanon, Feb. 21--Lebanese anti-aircraft guns fired at Israeli warplanes over southern Lebanon on Wednesday, a military spokesman said, indicating that Lebanon's army is taking a new assertiveness toward Israel, AP said.

The Israeli planes had "violated Lebanese sovereignty, posing a challenge to UN Resolution 1701,"

the spokesman said, referring to the Security Council resolution that ended Israel's 34-day war with Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon last August.

The Lebanese guns did not appear to have hit any Israeli planes, but the incident was the first time that the Lebanese military had fired at Israeli aircraft since the war. In Beit-ul-Moqaddas, the Israeli military declined to comment on the Lebanese statement.

Israeli warplanes have flown reconnaissance missions over Lebanon for years, despite protests from the Beirut government.

Israel, which often declines to comment on the operations of its air force, has defended the over-flights since the war as necessary to check that

Hezbollah is not being re-armed in violation of the cease-fire. Lebanon has far fewer military resources than Israel, but it has shown increased boldness in standing up to Israeli forces recently.

On Feb. 7, Lebanese troops fired at an Israeli military bulldozer after it allegedly crossed into south Lebanon.

The Israeli army fired back, but later said the bulldozer was still on the Israeli side of the U.N.-demarcated border.

After the war, the Lebanese army deployed some 16,000 troops in southern Lebanon, where Hezbollah guerrillas had previously been in control. The United Nations has sent more than 12,000 peacekeepers to the area to monitor the cease-fire.

Cheney Reassures Japan on N. Korea

TOKYO, Feb. 21--US Vice President Dick Cheney reassured Japan on Wednesday that the breakthrough North Korea nuclear deal was a "good first step" as a worried Tokyo stood by its refusal to fund the pact, AFP reported.

Cheney opened talks here at the start of a Pacific visit to close US allies Japan and Australia intended to step up cooperation over North Korea and war-torn Iraq.

Japan was one of six nations involved in marathon talks in Beijing last week that led to an agreement for North Korea to shut key nuclear facilities in exchange for badly needed fuel oil.

But Japan has refused to

provide energy aid to the nuclear-armed communist regime until it resolves an emotionally charged dispute over the past kidnappings of Japanese nationals.

Foreign Minister Taro Aso, who was to meet Cheney later in the day, warned that Japan could even expand its already tough sanctions on North Korea unless Pyongyang is "sincere" on the kidnapping dispute.

The vice president discussed the abductions among other issues in a breakfast meeting with Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, said Cheney spokeswoman Lea Anne McBride.

Cheney told the Japanese government's

number-two that the North Korea deal was "a good first step," McBride said. "They agreed to work together to watch North Korea."

The conservative vice president was also due to meet later with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has built his political career on the abduction issue.

Abe dismissed his foreign minister's talk of fresh sanctions but said he would tell Cheney about Japan's "efforts to resolve the kidnapping issue and how important it is."

He was due later to address US troops onboard the USS Kitty Hawk which is docked south of Tokyo.

Mideast Quartet Convenes

BERLIN, Feb. 21--The European Union, the US, the UN and Russia convene Wednesday in Berlin in search of a way to advance stalled Middle East peace efforts amid strong skepticism about the Palestinians' planned unity government.

According to AP, the meeting of the Quartet of Middle East peacemakers gives US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice a chance to report to her partners on her three-way summit Monday with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Germany, which holds the EU presidency, has pushed hard for the Quartet to take a key role in encouraging a revival of the peace process. The gathering at the German Foreign Ministry is the group's second meeting this month, following a Feb. 2 session in Washington.

Monday's summit concluded with no new agreements and a pledge to keep talking. The U.S., which had pushed for the session, said it was an accomplishment merely to bring the leaders together.

Abbas acknowledged that the talks had been "tense and difficult," but said "it was not a failure and it will be followed by other meetings."

But on Tuesday, Israel ruled out any talks on a final peace deal with Abbas if he goes ahead with plans for his moderate Fatah faction to join the Islamic militant Hamas in a new government.

The US and EU have demanded that any Palestinian government recognize Israel, accept previous peace agreements and renounce violence as a condition for restoring vital foreign aid. Hamas has rejected the conditions, and the unity government accord tries to finesse those points.

The Quartet meeting brings Rice together with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon; Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov; German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier; EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, and the bloc's external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

Rice was also meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is shouldering the European Union's leadership role in pushing for peace in the Middle East and has pressed for more frequent gatherings of the Quartet.

WORLD News In Brief

Media Project
TASHKENT--The EU has launched a one-million-Euro media freedom project in the Central Asian state of Uzbekistan. Uzbek and German officials said Wednesday. Six hundred journalists, 300 students and 150 government spokespeople are to be trained under the three-year project.

Greek Clash
THESSALONIKI--Anarchist youths clashed with riot police in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki on Wednesday, hurling rocks and dozens of petrol bombs outside a university building, authorities said.

UN: Philippine Army Responsible for Killings

MANILA, Philippines, Feb. 21--Extra-judicial killings in the Philippines are distressingly high and the military appeared to be responsible for a number of them, a United Nations investigator said on Wednesday.

According to Reuters, Philip Alston, an Australian law professor and UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial executions, delivered the strong indictment of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's government at a news conference after a 10-day investigation in the Southeast Asian nation.

Local rights group Karapatan has said more than 800 people, most of them left-wing activists, have been murdered or reported missing since Arroyo came to power in 2001. But the military says most of the deaths could be attributed to internal fighting in the communist New People's Army.

Alston said he did not know how many had died, but added: "I am certain the number is high enough to be distressing."

"The impact of even a limited number of killings of the type alleged is corrosive in many ways," he said.

The government said it was concerned about the killings and the fact it had invited the United Nations to investigate was proof it wanted to act on the matter.

"No right-thinking government or leader will tolerate such things happening and that's the reason why we're looking into it," Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita told reporters.

"It is the policy of the state to look into it and put a stop to it."

Alston laid much of the blame on the military.

"The armed forces remain in a state of almost total denial of its need to respond effectively and authentically to the significant number of killings which have been convincingly attributed to them," he said. However, he added there did not appear to be any state sanction for the killings: "I do not believe that there's a policy at the top designed to direct that these killings take place. I'm clear on that."

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