

PHOTO: AFP

Policemen stand guard as people watch the full dress rehearsal of the Republic Day parade in New Delhi yesterday.

## India goes on high alert ahead of Republic Day

### New Delhi declared no-fly zone during parade

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday went on high alert ahead of weekend Republic Day celebrations, with security forces flooding potential flashpoints including New Delhi, Kashmir and restive northeastern states.

The annual January 26 bash has become a favourite target for Islamic militants, especially in bitterly divided Kashmir and restive northeastern Assam state, where at least 10 rebel groups are fighting for secession.

Amid rising fears of suicide attacks by Islamic rebels, police have declared the Indian capital will be a no-fly zone during Sunday's annual military extravaganza, which will be guarded by thousands of policemen.

The threat in New Delhi has been increasing every year, especially after a deadly attack by militants on the Indian parliament building on December 13, 2001.

Police yesterday reviewed a five-tier security ring for Sunday's parade during a full rehearsal by marching troops, truck-mounted missiles and tanks.

Military jets will enforce a three-hour no-fly zone over central Rajpath area during Sunday's military extravaganza to mark the 55th anniversary of India becoming a republic, an airforce official said.

"We will not allow any civilian flights over Delhi because so many VIPs will be at one place," the official said of the annual event, where Iranian President Mohammad Khatami has this year been invited as chief guest.

Intelligence agencies have alerted the police here of possible attacks on the parade by pan-Islamic guerrilla groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Al-Badr, currently locked in combat with Indian troops in Kashmir.

The rebel organisations argue that the annual military event is part of Indian hegemony and purely muscle-flexing to browbeat its regional nuclear rival, Pakistan.

The parade will be attended by Indian President Abdul Kalam, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, his deputy Lal Krishna Advani and 170 visiting MPs from 80 countries.

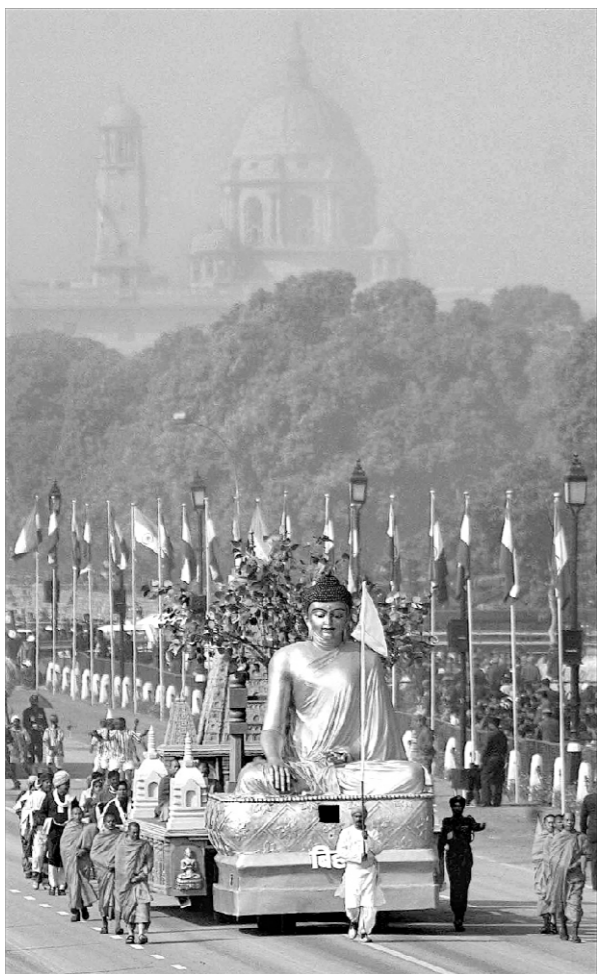


PHOTO: AFP

Buddhist monks from Bihar accompany a tableau representing Buddha during a full dress final rehearsal parade for India's Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi yesterday.

## Indo-Pak ties plunge to new depth

### New Delhi braces for tit-for-tat response over diplomat expulsion

AFP, New Delhi

India braced yesterday for a probable tit-for-tat response from Pakistan for its expulsion of four members of the Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi, as already-strained diplomatic ties between the nuclear rivals plunged even further.

The four were Wednesday given 48 hours to leave India because they were "indulging in activities incompatible with their diplomatic status" — a euphemism for spying,

an official from the Indian foreign ministry said.

Those given their marching orders were high-ranking Pakistani diplomat Mansoor Saeed Sheikh, First Secretary Mian Mohammad Esif and two embassy staffers.

Staff in the respective high commissions of the two countries had already been reduced by 50 per cent to about 55, according to the Indian press yesterday, following an attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 by gunmen New Delhi claims were sponsored by

Islamabad.

The incident, which left 15 people including five attackers dead, galvanised India into sending hundreds of thousands of troops to its borders, snapping rail, air and road links with its neighbour and recalling dozens of diplomatic staff, including its high commissioner.

Pakistan matched each punitive step and fears of war began to escalate, with the massacre by Islamic militants in Indian Kashmir last May of Indian soldiers and their families almost providing the spark.

An intensive international diplomatic flurry managed to pull the rivals back from the brink and following a commitment by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to rein in the militants, India announced it would reopen its air space to Pakistani planes and restock its high commission in Islamabad.

Almost seven months later, however, Pakistan has yet to take up the airspace offer while India has yet to send the veteran diplomat it identified as its new high commissioner in Islamabad, Harsh Bhasin,

across the border; although both sides have pulled back their troops.

On Wednesday, the Indian government, citing ongoing bloody assaults in Indian Kashmir, accused Pakistan of not only reneging on its promise to rein in militants but of actively helping rebels regroup in the Pakistan zone of the disputed state.

The expulsion orders were served Wednesday evening on Pakistan's chief diplomat in New Delhi, Jalil Abbas Jilani, who described them as "harsh".

## Terrorism, road link, gas pipeline to top India-Iran talks

AFP, New Delhi

Terrorism, a controversial gas pipeline and a road to Afghanistan will top discussions during a visit to India this weekend by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, officials said.

Khatami, who will arrive in New Delhi on Saturday, is to be the chief guest at India's 54th Republic Day celebrations Sunday.

Analysts here said Khatami's visit will help India and Iran deepen their political and economic ties, which have been steadily warming in the past decade.

"Both India and Iran are not traditional camp followers and both countries would like to find their own autonomy in the larger international context," said C Uday Bhaskar, deputy director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses.

Retired air commodore Jasjit Singh said India's relations with Iran had come a long way since Tehran backed Islamabad during two of the three wars between India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971.

The turnaround came in the early 1990s after a visit by the then Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to New Delhi.

"After some initial hesitation, Iran tilted toward India on the issue of Kashmir ... when few in the world were even willing to listen to our case," he said.

Kashmir is India's only Muslim majority state and is claimed by both New Delhi and Islamabad.

The Himalayan state has been in the throes of an insurgency since 1989, which has claimed more than 37,500 lives.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and funding the rebels fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir, charges Islamabad denies.

Kashmir is not the only issue which has drawn the two close. India and Iran also share similar views on terrorism and Afghanistan. India, Iran and Russia were the

main backers of an anti-Taliban alliance which routed the hardline Islamic regime with US help in Afghanistan in November 2001.

An Indian official said that during Khatami's visit India and Iran would sign a declaration which would outline the framework for "strategic cooperation" between New Delhi and Tehran and "a vision for the future."

"Both sides are also expected to urge the international community to forge a comprehensive convention on terrorism," the official said.

More recently, India and Iran have expressed similar views on possible US-led military action against Iraq, with both against solutions imposed "from outside," as the Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazmi has put it.

Economic relations also figure high on the agenda during Khatami's visit, an official said.

Earlier this month, India and Iran announced plans to construct a new road to Afghanistan to enhance their regional trade.

Iran is also expected to urge New Delhi to conclude discussions on the construction of a 3.5 billion dollar gas pipeline for which negotiations began in 1994.

But until now, no headway has been possible due to tensions between Pakistan and India, as well as the gargantuan cost of the project.

The project entails the construction of a 1,600-kilometre pipeline from southern Iran to the Pakistani province of Sindh before travelling on another 1,000 kilometres to India.

For Iran, which holds the world's largest gas reserves after Russia, the Indian market is as important as the European market which it hopes to serve one day through its pipeline with Turkey.