

India appoints new negotiator for talks over Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

India announced that retired bureaucrat N.N. Vohra would become New Delhi's envoy for dialogue with rebel groups in insurgency-wracked Kashmir.

Vohra, a former home secretary, will succeed K.C. Pant, who is head of India's state economic think-tank, the Planning Commission.

Pant was appointed two years ago as New Delhi's chief negotiator for Kashmir but only one separatist leader, Shabir Shah, agreed to meet him.

"The government has decided to nominate N.N. Vohra to carry on these consultations," Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani announced in parliament.

Advani said Indian Kashmir's dovish new chief minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed "welcomed" Vohra's appointment.

Nepal's King appeals for peace

AFP, Kathmandu,

Nepal's King Gyanendra yesterday voiced support for moves to negotiate an end to a bloody seven-year Maoist insurgency and appealed for a more "meaningful" form of democracy.

In a nationally televised address for the annual Democracy Day, Gyanendra said Nepalese "can benefit only if there is peace, harmony and stability."

"We have always given highest priority to this," the king said.

"The Nepalese people have long wished to see the end of the spiral of death and destruction prevailing in the country through dialogue, and such a hopeful endeavour is already underway," he said.

The Maoists, who want to remove the king, and Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand's government announced a ceasefire on January 29 in the insurgency that has claimed 7,800 lives since 1996.

The two sides are preparing for peace talks.

Safety system blamed for S Korean subway inferno



PHOTO: AFP

Grief-stricken relatives cry after viewing the charred wreckage of the subway train in which their loved ones died on February 18, 2003 after a former mental patient set fire to a packed subway train in the South Korean city of Daegu.

AFP, Daegu

The subway inferno in this south-eastern city was a disaster waiting to happen, experts said yesterday as investigators launched a probe into why so many people died.

The toll in the arson attack stood at 125 after 72 bodies were recovered from the wreckage late Tuesday, Daegu City mayor Cho Hae-Nyong said.

Most victims died from inhaling toxic smoke, according to hospital authorities. Many were trapped in the subway system which was plunged into pitch darkness after power at the Jungangno subway station was automatically shut down when the blaze broke out, experts said.

"The disaster in Daegu showed vividly that the emergency safety measures simply did not work," civil engineering professor Yoon Myeong-O of the University of Seoul said.

"The government must take a serious lesson from this disaster."

Yoon, an expert in subway fire safety, raised questions about how the blaze had been able to spread

so fast as internal fittings on subway trains were supposed to be made of fire-resistant material.

However, materials used in fittings inside the trains apparently crumpled in the intense heat, emitting thick clouds of toxic gases.

Interior furnishings included fibreglass and reinforced plastic, carbonated vinyl and polyethylene, according to experts.

"The failure to cope with the blaze properly in the first minutes of the fire starting must have aggravated the disaster," said Yoon, who added that subway personnel were all expected to have received training for such situations.

"Manuals are necessary for drivers, station workers and commanding officials on how to act in case of emergency and they are required to be well acquainted with them," Yoon said.

The underground station was clogged with black smoke and toxic gas, blinding and suffocating riders within minutes of the fire starting.

The fire broke out in one six-carriage train when a 56-year-old man with a history of mental illness poured gasoline onto the floor and

ignited it, police said.

The fire was already burning strongly when a second train running in the opposite direction approached the station.

"I was told by the station office to drive carefully as there was an accident in the station," the driver of this train was quoted as saying by police. "I did not know the accident meant fire," he said.

By all accounts, there was enough time to stop the second train arriving at the station.

But this train, No. 1080, came to a standstill inside the station and caught fire from the flames which were already sweeping through the first train.

Both six-carriage trains were completely burnt out.

To make the situation worse, the driver of train 1080 hesitated over what to do, keeping riders inside the train for 10 minutes, before he manually opened some of the doors, only to release riders into a wall of toxic smoke, according to media accounts.

Many other panicked riders were locked in the cars, unable to open the doors manually in the smoke-



PHOTO: AFP

A photo provided by a subway passenger and released February 19, 2003 in Daegu, shows people looking around curiously in a carriage filled with smoke at the initial stage of fire that burned two trains 18 February 2003.

filled darkness by pulling up the levers under the seats.

There were no sprinklers installed in the platform because of risks of electric short cuts from water and no fluorescent paint was used to indicate exits in darkness.

Most of the 125 victims died on this second train, according to rescue workers.

"This is a man-made disaster of the kind that happens in underdeveloped countries because of the indifference toward safety," said Suh Sang-Sup, a lawmaker of the opposition Grand National Party.

Lawmaker Lee Yoon-Soo of the ruling Millennium Democratic Party said the disaster was aggravated by the failure of emergency safety measures, urging the government to overhaul safety systems on all subway lines in the country.

The Seoul city government on Wednesday ordered changes to emergency safety measures on its vast subway system, including the use of fluorescent paint for exits, fire-proof material for train seats and removal of plastic internal fittings.

Israel kill 12 Palestinians in fresh attacks

AFP, Gaza

Israeli troops stormed into Gaza City early yesterday killing 10 Palestinians in gunbattles during what the army said was a crack-down on Palestinian "terrorist" operations.

An 11th Palestinian blew himself up next to an Israeli tank while a 12th, said to be mentally ill, was shot dead after a curfew in the West Bank town of Nablus in a new surge of bloodshed that has swept the region in recent days.

The suicide bomber belonged to the armed wing of the Palestinian militant movement Hamas, which has seen eight of its fighters killed by Israeli forces since Sunday -- seven of them in the Gaza Strip.

The overnight raid came just a day after Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz vowed to hit hard at the radical Hamas group after it blew up

an Israeli tank in the West Bank, killing the four soldiers inside.

No Israelis were reported injured in the clashes overnight, which also came as leading Palestinian and Israeli officials are in London for talks on reforms and aid for Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

About 50 Israeli tanks backed by bulldozers and helicopters penetrated about two kilometers (one mile) into Sadjaiyeh in the eastern part of Gaza City overnight, Palestinian security officials said.

They said Israeli troops destroyed two metal workshops and a house, and searched several other houses as exchanges of fire took place.

The soldiers also seriously damaged a school sponsored by Hamas founder and spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin. Witnesses said the soldiers later started to

withdraw, and an Israeli army spokesman said the raid lasted six hours.

An Israeli television channel reported Tuesday that Sharon held secret talks last weekend with Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayad on a truce to end the 29-month-old Palestinian uprising which has left almost 3,000 dead.

Israeli officials refused to comment on the report, while Palestinian officials said Fayad could not be reached as he was attending meetings on Palestinian reforms in London.

An Israeli delegation is also there but the two sides are not meeting with each other.

Fayad has undertaken reforms to counter official corruption and secured the transfer of millions of dollars in Palestinian funds frozen by Israel.

Bush nonchalant over worldwide protests

AP, Washington

Over the weekend, protesters took to the streets around the world in anti-war demonstrations that rivalled those of the Vietnam war era.

Declaring that America's security should not be dictated by protesters, US President George Bush said he would not be swayed from compelling Saddam to disarm. "We will deal with him," Bush said.

"War is my last choice," Bush said at the White House. "But the risk of doing nothing is even a worse option as far as I am concerned."

Standing firmly against sceptical allies as well as the demonstrators, Bush said: "I owe it to the American people to secure this country. I will do so."

Administration officials in Washington and at the United Nations in New York were discussing the possible gains as well as the risk of a diplomatic defeat if the United States proposed a new resolution to the Security Council to

endorse force as an option to disarm Iraq.

One US official said Tuesday there was no decision on a text or

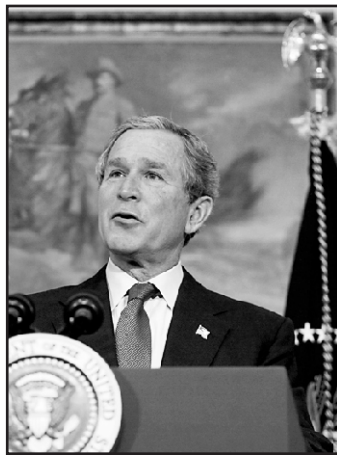


PHOTO: AFP

even on whether to go ahead, though White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, "I think it will be a simple and rather straightforward

resolution."

Bush said a second resolution "would be useful," although "we don't need a second resolution. It's clear this guy could even care less about the first resolution. He's in total defiance."

In Rome, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Iraq had to "move very fast" to heed the call of the international community and cooperate with UN inspectors. But he said it was up to the Security Council to decide if the inspections had gone on long enough.

France, with support from Russia and China, does not accept the US view that the Security Council effectively endorsed force as an option to disarm Iraq in an earlier resolution that warned of "serious consequences" if Saddam persisted in defying UN demands.

France, China and Russia all have the power to kill any resolution with a veto or to threaten a veto to try to force the United States and Britain to soften their approach.

Fresh wave of British troops fly out to Gulf

AFP, RAF Brize Norton

A fresh wave of British troops flew out to the Gulf yesterday as the military build-up ahead of a possible war against Iraq neared completion.

Around 1,000 members of 16 Air Assault Brigade, including paratroopers, infantry and support units, left RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire on three overnight flights, military officials said.

The troops -- mainly from the 3rd Battalion the Parachute Regiment, based in Colchester -- are among the last from Britain expected to be deployed to the Gulf region.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, defying growing popular opposition to war in Iraq, has committed 30,000 ground troops and marines, a 17-ship naval task force and some 100 warplanes to a potential US-led attack on Iraq.

Veerappan surrounded, says Tamil Nadu police

PTI, Madurai

Forest bandit Veerappan has been surrounded in the MM hills area by the personnel of the Special Task Forces of both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and he would find it very difficult to escape the dragnet, a high-ranking official of the Tamil Nadu police said yesterday.

"Veerappan is holed up now and he will be nabbed very soon," Tamil Nadu Director General of Police, R Rajagopalan, told reporters in Madurai.

The DGP, who had himself ventured into the forest recently and stayed there for three days for an on-the-spot assessment of the progress made in the efforts to nab Veerappan, said police had fixed four 'points' for intensive combing operations. These were Ilanjikarai, Kattakarai and Palaru in Tamil Nadu and Thengadi on the Karnataka side.

Asked to comment on reports of Veerappan planning to strike again, he ruled out the possibility and shot back "how can a man on the run in a restricted area strike?"

The DGP, who was speaking to reporters after visiting an STF constable in hospital who was injured in an accident, said that the government would meet all his treatment expenses.

N Korea and US exchange tough words on nuke crisis

REUTERS, Seoul/Washington

North Korea said yesterday that Washington's rejection of bilateral talks to solve a deepening nuclear crisis was illogical and aimed to thwart Pyongyang's efforts to improve its economy and communist system.

North Korea wants a non-aggression pact with the United States, while Washington favours multilateral talks to press Pyongyang to shut down its suspected nuclear weapons program.

War warnings and assertions the United States was poised to attack the North have been daily fare in Pyongyang's official media since the crisis flared up nearly five months ago. North Korea threatened on Tuesday to pull out of the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War if sanctions were imposed on it.

Washington dismissed that as "strident rhetoric" but North Korea hit back with its own dig at the United States.

"The US is insisting on its strange assertion that it cannot respond to the DPRK-US talks as they mean a sort of reward for the DPRK despite the unanimous world

public opinion that DPRK-US direct talks should take place to find a peaceful solution to the nuclear issue," North Korea's KCNA news agency quoted the foreign ministry as saying in a statement.

"This is an illogical far-fetched assertion," the ministry added. DPRK stands for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The statement, which KCNA published on Wednesday, said Washington was desperately trying to hamstring the North's efforts to improve its communist system.

A second KCNA report said the US announcement this week of major annual US-South Korean military drills to be held in March and April "clearly prove that the US reckless plan for a nuclear war has entered the phase of practical implementation."

South Korean President-elect Roh Moo-hyun, to be inaugurated next week, has been caught in the middle of the crisis.

Roh, highlighting a South Korea-US rift that Pyongyang has worked hard to widen, said on Wednesday he differed with the United States because he would rule out a military attack on the North, while

Washington says it retains that option."

"I oppose even considering an armed attack on North Korea at this stage because that can provoke a war which would have serious consequences," Roh told industry leaders.

"We have never had a difference of opinion with the United States on an international level. But we have one now on how we plan to counter North Korea," he said.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer called Pyongyang's comments "predictable," but said President Bush was still searching for a diplomatic resolution.

"This is not the first time that North Korea has used strident rhetoric as a way to blackmail other nations into providing economic or other benefits..." Fleischer said.

Bush and other US officials have repeatedly said Washington has no intention of attacking the North.

It was not clear whether the armistice threat, by the North's Korean People's Army, or KPA, was anything more than fresh brinkmanship. North Korea quit most armistice activities in 1994 and has a history of challenging the truce.



PHOTO: AFP

Tourism hostesses dressed up in traditional costumes pose in front of a poster of the Petronas Twin Towers at the venue of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Kuala Lumpur. The summit starting 20 - 25 February is shaping up as a major anti-Iraq platform for leaders of the 114-nation grouping, the largest organisation of states outside the United Nations.