

Kashmir Committee suspends talks

PTI, New Delhi

Six months after coming into existence, the Kashmir Committee headed by former Union Law Minister Ram Jethmalani suspended yesterday its agenda of talks with separatists in Jammu and Kashmir saying the Centre's new interlocutor N N Vohra should be given a "free field" to find peace in the restive state.

Stating that the suspension of talks with separatist groups could be a prelude to closing down of its operations in the state. Convenor of the Kashmir Committee Ashok Bhan said, "We don't want to be seen as the one who plays spoil sport in bringing peace to the state. Our aim was to restore the lost glory and we don't mind anyone from the government shouldering the responsibility."

However, Bhan said the Government had caused a lot of impediments in its efforts to restore peace in the state.

The Committee had done its job and shown the path to the Central regime that "one could win the hearts of the people in the state with love. A proper hearing is all that is needed," Bhan said.

The seven-member committee was formed in August last year. Besides Jethmalani and Bhan, the other members of the committee included former Law Minister Shanti Bhushan, eminent lawyer Fali Nariman, noted scribes Dileep Padgaonkar and M J Akbar and retired diplomat V K Grover.

All the separatist groups, which always had a clash of ideas, were of the common opinion that return of Kashmiri pundits was essential and that no trifurcation of state allowed, Bhan said.

The name of Vohra was announced by Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani in Parliament on February 19.

The Kashmir Committee, during last six months, visited Kashmir valley and other parts of the state twice and also held at least four rounds of talks with Hurriyat and other senior separatist leader Shabir Shah besides holding talks with political parties in the state.

US to move troops to Turkey under tentative deal

REUTERS, Washington

The US military hopes to begin moving thousands of troops to Turkey as early as next week to take part in a possible invasion of Iraq under a tentative deal on US aid for Turkey, US defence officials said on Saturday.

"Things seem to be moving forward," one of the officials, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters.

The American officials stressed that a deal was not yet final, but Turkey's parliament was expected to approve it in a vote next week.

In return for allowing US troops to use bases in Turkey to launch an attack on Iraq, the United States is offering Ankara a multibillion-dollar aid package aimed at cushioning its fragile economy against the shock of a possible war.

US officials say the aid package tentatively agreed by both sides

would give Turkey \$6 billion, of which \$1 billion would secure an immediate \$10 billion loan.

The roughly \$5 billion in US cash assistance remaining would be split into economic grants and military aid. The United States has also offered Ankara up to \$1 billion worth of oil from regional allies Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Earlier proposed US aid packages envisaged up to \$20 billion in loan guarantees spread over three years, whereas the latest version allows Ankara to take the cash and loans up-front.

At the Bush administration's urging, US House of Representatives Speaker Dennis Hastert has privately assured Turkish officials that Congress would move swiftly to approve the aid once a final agreement is reached.

Asked if Turkey and the United States had reached a final deal,

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said he had "nothing to report."

"We continue to have good consultations with Turkey and I anticipate they will continue a little longer," Fleischer told reporters in Crawford, Texas where President Bush is spending the weekend at his ranch.

The United States plans to move up to 40,000 troops, most of them from the 4th Infantry Division, to Turkey. The division's heavy equipment, including tanks and other supplies already are on cargo ships headed for Turkey.

The troops would be flown there for quick arrival to join a force of nearly 200,000 U.S. and British military personnel gathered in the Gulf region for a possible invasion of Iraq.

Reuters from Beijing reports: Secretary of State Colin Powell said yesterday it was "time to take

action" to disarm Iraq as he arrived in China seeking support for possible war on Baghdad and a diplomatic push to end North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

The UN Security Council was likely to decide what to do on Iraq soon after a March 7 report by UN weapons inspectors, Powell told a news conference in Tokyo after meeting Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and other Japanese officials.

"It is time to take action. The evidence is clear. They are guilty... We are reaching that point where serious consequences must flow," Powell said, using a term Washington employs to mean the use of military force.

Japan had offered support for the US stand on disarming Iraq and on pursuing a "multilateral" diplomatic approach to persuade North Korea to give up its suspected nuclear weapons program, Powell said.

Girl with wrong transplant dies in US

AP, Durham

Jessica Santillan, the teenager who survived a botched heart-lung transplant long enough to get an odds-shattering second set of donated organs, died on Saturday, two days after the second transplant.

Doctors declared her brain dead at 1:25 p.m. and took her off life-support machines at about 5 p.m., said Duke University Medical Centre spokesman Richard Puff.

He said he did not know if the hospital had the family's consent to turn off the machines. An attorney for the family had said hours earlier that the Santillans had wanted to keep Jessica alive and get another, outside opinion on her chance of recovery.

Jessica, 17, whose own heart was deformed, received a heart-lung transplant Feb. 7, but from a donor of a different blood type. Her body rejected the transplant and she was near death by the time the second set of organs was placed in her body early Thursday.



Rescue workers remove the body of a victim from inside the night club The Station West Warwick, RI, where at least 65 people died after the band's pyrotechnics display may have set off a fire which sent hundreds more to the hospital.

Five killed in Gaza after Israeli incursion

AFP, Gaza City

Two more Palestinians were killed Sunday in an Israel tank raid on Beit Hanun in the northern Gaza Strip, bringing the toll from the incursion to five, Palestinian medics said.

Policeman Ayman Abu Shara, 32, was brought to El Awda hospital in nearby Jabalya after having his head blown off in the clashes in Beit Hanun, medics said.

The other slain man was identified as Wael al-Garbawi, 31, a worker from Beit Hanun's industrial zone, they said.

Meanwhile Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud party yesterday signed a coalition deal with the National Religious Party (NRP), the mouthpiece of Jewish settlers in the Palestinian territories, officials from both sides said.

NRP leader Effi Eitam told army radio that Likud agreed that Jewish

settlements "will be enlarged to accommodate the natural growth of their population."

Eitam added that the programme of the future government set out in the agreement "does not mention the creation of a Palestinian state, nor the roadmap, nor the (peace) plan of US President George W. Bush."

Army radio said the accord could also allow the party, which speaks for some 200,000 settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, to append to the new government's agenda a letter stating it will "oppose by all means available the creation of a Palestinian state."

Sharon has agreed in principle to the establishment of a Palestinian state created in steps by a plan developed by the diplomatic quartet of the United States, the United Nations, European Union and Russia.

Iran to disclose information on nuke facilities

AP, Tehran

Iran has agreed to provide early information about any proposed nuclear facility's design, the top UN nuclear inspector said on Saturday.

Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency who is in charge of nuclear inspections in Iraq, also said Iran will consider letting his agency inspect undeclared nuclear facilities without prior announcement.

"It is a sign of greater transparency from Iran regarding its nuclear programs," he told reporters at the end of a two-day visit to Iran.

ElBaradei's visit to Iran included a tour of an incomplete nuclear plant in Natanz, about 200 miles south of Tehran. He also met with Iranian President Mohamad Khatami before leaving a day ahead of

schedule. He had been scheduled to visit a nuclear facility in Isfahan in central Iran.

In Vienna, IAEA spokeswoman Melissa Fleming said ElBaradei left early because he had accomplished the visits and meetings he had set out to do.

She told The Associated Press that two senior members of ElBaradei's team would stay in Iran for several days.

ElBaradei was visiting Iran's nuclear facilities to ensure its nuclear industry was limited to peaceful, civilian purposes and to check the safety of generating plants.

The Islamic country announced earlier this month that it had started mining uranium for the first time and was building facilities, including the one at Natanz, to process ore into

fuel for nuclear power plants.

Iran maintains it will use its nuclear power for energy production only, but the United States claims the facilities are part of a secret nuclear weapons program.

In December, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said satellite imagery showed some structures at the Natanz plant were being covered with earth, indicating Iran is building "a secret underground site where it could produce fissile material."

But Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran's envoy to the UN agency, said that the walled compound was built partially underground for safety reasons.

Meanwhile, Khatami reiterated that his country was following international regulations and that its facilities are open to UN inspections.

Putin speaks to Blair about Iraq

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke to British Prime Minister Tony Blair about Iraq yesterday, explaining Moscow's efforts to avert an attack on Baghdad, the Kremlin said in a statement.

"The president of Russia informed the British Prime Minister about the efforts, which are being taken not only by the Russian Federation but also together with other governments, to find a political-diplomatic resolution to the Iraqi problem," the statement said.

The statement came after diplomatic sources in Baghdad confirmed that former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, an Arab specialist with close ties to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, arrived in Baghdad.

Primakov was former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev's envoy to the Gulf during the crisis of 1990-1991 set off when Iraqi troops overran Kuwait.

His close relations with Saddam enabled him to intercede effectively in a stand-off between Iraq and the United Nations in February 1998.



Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (L), Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) and South African President Thabo Mbeki share a light moment at the opening of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) business forum in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday.

Mahathir accuses West of targetting Muslims

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Western nations are targeting Muslims rather than weapons of mass destruction, Malaysian President Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday ahead of a 114-country Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit that will reject any "unilateral" attack on Iraq.

Mahathir, whose largely Muslim country is hosting the NAM conference from Monday, cited the West's "mild" reaction to North Korea's nuclear drive as proof that the looming Iraqi conflict was aimed at Islam rather than disarming Saddam Hussein.

"The fact that North Korea's open admission that it has weapons of mass destruction has met only with mild admonishment by the West seems to prove that indeed it is against Muslims and not against the fear of possession of weapons of mass destruction by the so-called rogue states," he told a business forum.

The Malaysian leader, who has previously warned that attacking Iraq would encourage global terrorism, said a new Gulf War would "simply anger more Muslims who are likely to view it as a strike against their religion rather than against terrorism".

Foreign ministers meeting ahead of the summit have already

approved a resolution rejecting any action against Iraq which has not been sanctioned by the United Nations.

The NAM, which represents two-thirds of the UN, will also call on Iraq to cooperate "actively" with weapons inspectors searching for banned weapons of mass destruction.

"We reaffirm our commitment to exert our efforts to achieve a peaceful solution to the current situation," says the resolution due to be adopted at the summit.

Iraq is set to be the main talking point of the summit and Saddam Hussein's Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan arrived here Sunday, according to local media, one of scores of world leaders and top delegates.

Ramadan told reporters before leaving Baghdad that he would carry with him "a great number of documents, information, tapes and evidence to inform all delegations about the truth of what is happening in Iraq".

The evidence will help "show the truth about Iraq's cooperation with the UN disarmament inspectors, the truth about the harm done to Iraq and the unjust allegations," Ramadan said.

But the declaration tabled for adoption is a watered-down version of the document earlier proposed by

the NAM's Arab bloc. Paragraphs saying NAM members "categorically reject the threats of unilateral use of force" and express "support and solidarity with Iraq vis-a-vis the possible aggression against it" have been dropped.

Delegates meeting ahead of the two-day leaders' summit have also rejected attempts by North Korea to blame the United States for the stand-off over Pyongyang's reactivated nuclear program.

A draft statement makes no reference to Pyongyang's position, saying only that the organisation is "concerned" over developments and wants "to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully."

Discussions continued Sunday on the final Kuala Lumpur Declaration, with North Korea and a passage on global terrorism the sticking points, delegates said.

The NAM, a forum for the world's poorest nations, also rebuffed an Arab proposal to adopt a statement condemning "the war crimes and systematic human rights violations that have been committed by Israeli occupying forces against the Palestinian people".

Leaders will, however, call for Israelis accused of "reported war crimes" against Palestinians to be brought to trial.

Experts try to identify bodies from club fire

REUTERS, Rhode Island

Pathology experts struggled to identify victims of an inferno at a Rhode Island night club that killed at least 96 people, a tragedy that the distraught club owner said would haunt him forever.

As the task of attaching names to charred bodies continued, with only 15 identified by late Saturday, police and federal agents tried to pin down responsibility for the blaze, set off by a pyrotechnics display at The Station night club on Thursday night at the start of a rock show.

Rhode Island Governor Don Carcieri said at a late afternoon news conference that "it is my understanding that things were picked up at the site that will help with that" investigation. He declined to elaborate.

Some 20 state police detectives were interviewing survivors and people from the area, while a similar number of federal agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms helped comb through the club's burned-out remains.

It was one of the worst night club disasters ever in the United States.

The fire was ignited by pyrotechnics set off as the heavy metal band Great White began their set. Video footage taken inside the club showed flames licking at foam insulation behind the stage, which erupted into a fast-moving fire that sent panicked fans stampeding for the exits.

In dispute is whether the band requested or obtained permission for the display, authorities said. Fireworks were not allowed in The Station, fire officials say. The club's

owners and the band's management have traded accusations over the tragedy.

"It is very difficult to express what I experienced at the club that evening, trying to get people out safely," an emotional Jeffrey Derderian, one of the owners of the club, told reporters.

"Please know I tried as hard as I could," he sobbed. "Many people didn't make it out and that is a horror that will haunt my family and I for the rest of our lives."

Teams of forensic doctors and dentists working under State Medical Examiner Elizabeth Laposata were working around the clock to identify the remaining victims, Carcieri said.

"Clearly, there shouldn't have been fireworks in there," Carcieri told reporters earlier. "Somebody made a very, very bad decision, and it lost a lot of people their lives."

Carcieri said many of the bodies will have to be identified through dental records. He said an appeal to local dentists for medical records had yielded a huge response.

Most of the victims were so badly burned that fewer than 10 were identified through visual matches, he said.

Some 80 people remained hospitalised Carcieri said, with roughly 20 in critical condition. All but one of the hospitalised victims had been identified, he said.

Investigators were also probing whether the club's capacity limit of 300 had been exceeded. Carcieri said it appeared it had been.