

Kashmiri rebel leader Javed Mir detained

AFP, Srinagar

Police in this capital of Indian Kashmir detained a senior pro-independence leader Friday, just hours ahead the start of a two-day visit to the insurgency-ravaged region by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, witnesses said.

Javed Mir, vice chairman of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), was picked up near Srinagar's commercial hub Lal Chowk, a spokesman for Kashmir's main separatist alliance the All Parties Hurriyat Conference said.

The JKLF is part of Hurriyat -- a 23 party conglomerate which opposes Indian rule in the divided state.

The spokesman said Mir was to lead a demonstration against Vajpayee's visit.

Hurriyat has called for a two-day general strike coinciding with Vajpayee's visit to "highlight that Kashmiris want resolution of the issue through talks."

Mir is periodically detained and released for leading anti-Indian protests in Kashmir -- a scenic Himalayan region which is in the throes of 14-year old anti-Indian rebellion that has so far left more than 38,000 people dead.

Separatists put the toll twice as high.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) and Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed (L) listen to a Kashmiri woman during a public rally in Srinagar on Friday. Vajpayee kicked off a two-day tour of violence-wrecked Indian part of Kashmir with a fresh call for peace with arch-rival Pakistan.

PHOTO: AFP

Vajpayee offers olive branch to Pakistan

PM promises Kashmiris better days ahead

REUTERS, AFP, Srinagar

India's prime minister, in a rare visit to Kashmir, called for talks with Pakistan and over the war-torn Himalayan region on Friday and promised its people better days ahead.

Speaking from behind bullet-proof glass and amid tight security, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told a cheering crowd of about 10,000, mostly supporters of the state government bussed in from villages, violence was no answer.

"All issues should be settled through talks," he said in a brief speech that appeared conciliatory to both Pakistan and Kashmiri groups in the first public address by an Indian prime minister in the Kashmir valley in more than 15 years.

"We are ready... (to discuss) both internal and external problems. Guns will not solve the matter but brotherhood will.

"We again extend the hand of friendship but it has to be a two-way road. Both sides should decide to live together," he said, adding it was now up to Pakistan to respond.

India has said it will talk with Pakistan only after Islamabad ends support for Muslim militants fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir in a 13-year rebellion that has killed more than 38,000 people, many of them civilians.

As hundreds of heavily armed police and soldiers in battle gear guarded the Sher-e-Kashmir (Lion of Kashmir) stadium where Vajpayee spoke, many supporters in the audience shouted in Urdu: "We want peace with dignity."

But most of Srinagar, summer capital of India's only Muslim-majority state, was deserted after separatists called a strike for Vajpayee's two-day visit from Friday to demand talks.

Shops and businesses in the normally bustling city were shuttered and padlocked and soldiers patrolled the streets.

Vajpayee did not unveil an expected plan to boost living standards in the impoverished state, but said the government would work to create more jobs.

"I have come here to convince you that days are changing. Prosperity will come," he said.

Hopes of peace and economic gains in the once rich state of 10 million increased after a new government promising a healing touch was elected late last year in the first state poll generally regarded as free and fair since the rebellion began.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan came close to their third war over Kashmir during a 10-month military standoff last year triggered by an attack on India's parliament that New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based Kashmiri separatists.

Although troops have been pulled back, saber-rattling continues on both sides, alarming the world community, and tensions increased after the massacre of 24 Hindu civilians last month blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage may visit India and Pakistan in the next several weeks in the latest diplomatic efforts to ease tensions on the subcontinent, officials said in Washington on Thursday.

Armitage was likely to discuss issues including stopping Muslim militants slipping into Indian-controlled Kashmir and reviving Indian-Pakistani dialogue, one official said.

Meanwhile, a general strike called by Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), closed down shops and businesses in the summer capital Friday.

It also took most of the traffic off the roads.

Hurriyat has called for a two-day strike coinciding with the visit to highlight that Kashmiris want the future of the disputed region resolved through talks.

Vajpayee's visit comes at a time of fresh tension between India and Pakistan following a surge of violence since Himalayan snows began melting with the arrival of spring, reopening tracks used by militants infiltrating Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani zone.

Concerned at the deteriorating mood in South Asia, Washington said overnight it was considering Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

US unable to stop Kashmir incursion

REUTERS, New Delhi

A senior US State Department official said on Thursday that Washington has been unable to persuade Pakistan to "stop cross-border terrorism" against India but would continue to press Islamabad to take steps on the issue.

"The United States for some time has urged the Pakistani government to stop cross-border terrorism across the line of control. I will be honest: we have not succeeded," Richard Haas, director for policy planning at the State Department, said.

India, which almost went to war last year with Pakistan, accuses Pakistan of helping militants infiltrate into Kashmir to join a separatist revolt there.

Islamabad said last year it would

stop militants from crossing into Kashmir across a ceasefire line after hectic lobbying by Washington. That assurance helped pull the two countries back from the brink of war.

Pakistan officially joined the United States' war on terrorism after the September 11, 2001 attacks but India has accused western nations of sparing Pakistan in the war against terrorism.

New Delhi says Islamabad continues to push militants into Kashmir.

"We are at times disappointed and frustrated with that reality," Haas told an Indian television channel by phone.

"It will continue to be a major diplomatic priority for the United States, something that continues, that we talk about."

Pakistan says the incursions have stopped.

China vows transparent war against killer virus

REUTERS, Beijing

China's Communist Party leadership, accused of half-hearted cooperation with the world on the SARS outbreak and masking its own numbers, has ordered an all-out -- and open -- war against the deadly virus.

The powerful Politburo Standing Committee said all officials had to come clean on all aspects of what it said would be a long and tough fight against a disease that has spread to about 25 countries, killed 164 people and infected more than 3,500.

"There must be no delay and no deceit in reporting," Friday's state newspapers quoted the committee as saying, after a special meeting chaired by party boss Hu Jintao.

The nine-man body held Thursday's meeting just one day after World Health Organisation experts accused Beijing of not reporting all its cases, saying the city might have up to 200 SARS cases instead of the 37 reported officially.

City officials ignored the WHO charge on Thursday, refusing to change their tally, and the national government said it had acted responsibly since the first SARS case appeared in the southern province of Guangdong last November.

But on Friday, the party mouthpiece People's Daily devoted about five pages and more than 20 separate items to coverage of the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, another sign the party was ratcheting up pressure on officials.

And some local governments began releasing

figures on suspected SARS patients after weeks of reporting only confirmed infections. Beijing tallied 15 suspected SARS patients, the English-language China Daily said.

The illness has already spread to 10 provinces, regions and major cities in the world's most populous nation and there are fears the disease may spread further when 100 million Chinese travel during a week-long holiday in early May.

"Despite marked progress in SARS control work, the task ahead remains arduous and complicated," the Politburo committee said.

Virtually all newspapers reported the demand from the committee that leaders throughout the vast country "personally oversee" efforts to control the spread of SARS.

State media reported two more deaths on Friday, taking the toll to 67. The WHO reported 25 fresh SARS cases, bringing the national total to 1,482.

But it remained to be seen whether the tongue-lashing would defuse some criticism from abroad that China was very late in telling the world it was facing a new disease when SARS broke out and then slow to share its data.

Underlining neighbors' concerns, the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations has asked Beijing to postpone an annual meeting of senior officials originally scheduled for next week in southern China, diplomats told Reuters.

Southeast Asian leaders will meet in Bangkok on April 29 to hammer out ways of tackling the virus and its economic impact.

The disease leapt into neighboring Hong Kong, the former British territory of seven million people where the numbers of deaths and cases almost equal those in China.

From there, air travelers spread it far and wide, changing lives and business, disrupting sporting events and threatening serious economic damage.

Hong Kong and Singapore, also hit very hard by the virus, are checking airline passengers for fever. India and Australia confirmed their first cases.

Canada, the only non-Asian country where people have died of SARS, feared hundreds more might be at risk after a few residents of a Toronto high-rise apartment building showed symptoms consistent with the mysterious illness.

Brazil began screening cargo ships from high-risk areas.

But the WHO did confirm SARS, which is contagious, sometimes fatal and has no known cure, was caused by a member of the coronavirus family never before seen in humans.

That means doctors now know what they are looking for and diagnosis will be much easier.

Experts said they were optimistic the disease could be controlled using existing measures.

Economists estimate the epidemic has already caused at least \$30 billion in losses worldwide and will pose more of a threat to Asia's economic growth than the war on Iraq, through lower tourist earnings and reduced consumer spending.



Catholics attend mass in Hong Kong's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Central district yesterday wearing masks to protect against the killer pneumonia on Good Friday. The disease known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has killed 66 people in the territory since its eruption in February.

PHOTO: AFP

Opposition leader shot dead in Moscow

REUTERS, Moscow

A veteran Russian liberal politician, leader of a staunchly anti-Kremlin party, was shot dead Thursday in an attack that Moscow's police chief said was the work of a contract killer.

Sergei Yushenkov, whose Liberal Russia party was founded by exiled business tycoon Boris Berezovsky -- himself at odds with President Vladimir Putin -- died shortly after being shot at close range near his home in northern Moscow, police said.

"It is obviously the work of a professional killer," the Itar-Tass news agency quoted Vladimir Pronin, head of the Moscow police, as saying.

The murder in broad daylight of a key figure in Russia's liberal movement and deputy in the State Duma lower chamber deals a blow to Putin, who came to power on the back of his image as a strong leader capable of dealing with rampant crime.

Interfax news agency quoted police as saying the unknown assailant, armed with a silenced pistol, fired four bullets in Yushenkov's back as the 52-year-old parliamentarian stepped out of his car. The attacker then threw down the gun and fled.

"I have no doubts this murder was politically motivated," Duma Speaker Gennady Seleznyov was quoted as saying, echoing the comments of other politicians.

Police investigators were also quoted as saying Yushenkov's "professional duties" were the likely motive.

Muslims, Tamils clash in eastern Lanka

REUTERS, Muttur

Muslim and Tamil mobs traded gunfire in eastern Sri Lanka on Friday as cabinet ministers met to solve the latest crisis threatening the island's peace bid ahead of a huge donors' meeting set for Tokyo.

Police fired tear gas to keep the crowds apart in the eastern area of Muttur, 230 km (140 miles) east of Colombo, the site of increased tension between Muslims and mostly Hindu Tamils after the alleged abduction of two youths by Tamil Tiger rebels.

The clashes have left two dead and have highlighted long-standing friction in Sri Lanka's volatile east that officials say must be reduced if a bid to end the island's two-decade war is to go ahead.

"If this escalates, this could affect the peace process very negatively," said Muslim Affairs Minister Rauff Hakeem, a member of the island's peace negotiating team who is under pressure to pull his Sri Lanka Muslim Congress party out of the government.

As Hakeem was speaking at an army camp near Muttur, gunfire could be heard from outside the camp.

"The government must take full responsibility for the security of

Muslims. I'm under tremendous pressure from my politburo to leave the government," he said.

If Hakeem's party left the government, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, a driving force behind the peace process, would have to rely on a Tamil party to keep his majority in parliament.

The clashes and political worries come as Wickremesinghe and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who signed a truce in February 2002, prepare for a donors' conference in Tokyo in June to raise money to rebuild war-hit parts of the island.

Military spokesman Brigadier Sanath Karunaratne said Defense Minister Tilak Marapana was meeting local Muslim and Tamil officials, along with Hakeem, to try to ease the tension.

"They are meeting to try to solve the security and political issues," he said, adding at least seven people had been wounded.

Muslims comprise about eight percent of the island's population, but make up about one-third in the east, and the community is seen as crucial to any peace settlement.

S Korea predicts tough, lengthy nuke talks

AFP, Seoul

Negotiations to resolve the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula set to open next week in Beijing will be tough and lengthy with no guarantee of success, South Korea's new envoy to Washington said Friday.

Han Sung-joo was South Korea's foreign minister 10 years ago when the United States and North Korea agreed to settle a previous nuclear crisis after nearly two years of negotiations.

"This time, the crisis is more immediate, and the negotiation process will be more arduous, said Han, who travels to Washington Sunday to take up his post as ambassador.

The United States, China and North Korea have agreed to meet in Beijing for talks next week on the six-month-old nuclear crisis.

This time, however, Han said North

Korea was closer to having nuclear weapons than in 1993, if it did not already possess them, while a post September 11 United States was more determined than ever to crack down on Pyongyang.

"The United States will have a North Korea which is probably more tempted to have nuclear weapons... and North Korea will be facing a United States which is more determined to deal with the nuclear issue," Han told a press conference here.

"This is going to be a much more immediate, urgent and intense kind of negotiation with a great deal at stake on everybody's part," he said.

The previous nuclear crisis over Pyongyang's plutonium production was resolved when Washington and Pyongyang signed the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, freezing North

Korea's nuclear weapons drive in return for fuel oil and the construction of two proliferation-free nuclear reactors.

That deal fell through last year when Washington said North Korea was engaged in another clandestine nuclear programme using enriched uranium in violation of the accord.

Han said he was unsure whether North Korea intended to negotiate away its nuclear ambitions or whether the talks would fail.

"We still don't know whether North Korea wants to become a nuclear state... or in fact they would like to make a deal," he said.

"It will take very concerted and coordinated efforts from the rest of the world but especially from the United States and South Korea to make North Korea understand it is in its interests to come to an agreement."



Raquel Cortez rescues her television on Thursday from what is left of her home after a petrol pipeline exploded in Quito, Ecuador. Officials said two people were reported killed along with 15 injured and three homes destroyed in the explosion, which authorities report was caused by an unknown group of people trying to steal fuel from the line.

PHOTO: AFP

Togadia applies for bail again

PTI, Ajmer

A bail application on behalf of the VHP leader Praveen Togadia, presently in judicial custody on the charges of violation of prohibitory orders and ban on trident, was moved in the District and Session court in Ajmer, an official said.

The bail was filed by Togadia's counsel Onkar Singh Lakhawat in the district court of HS Punia who will take up this case for hearing on Saturday, the official said.

Togadia was not brought from the jail when the bail plea was moved by his counsel, the Superintendent of Police S Srivastava said.

Rebels damage two gas pipelines in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

An ethnic rebel army in military-ruled Myanmar has damaged two gas pipelines in recent weeks, the junta said Friday.

A gas pipeline near a village 105 kilometres (65 miles) south of Mawlamyine, the capital of southeastern Mon state, was partly damaged by explosives on Tuesday, the junta said in a statement.

It said those responsible left behind the flag of the New Mon State Party, a former ethnic rebel group which has already made peace with the junta.

"Further investigations revealed that the sabotage operation was being carried out by the KNU (Karen National Union) sixth brigade, it is learnt," the statement said.

The KNU is one of few remaining rebel groups fighting an independence campaign against the military government in Yangon. The junta estimates there are 7,000 rebels in the insurgent group.