

# Pakistan for talks with India without pre-conditions

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday it was ready to hold talks with India at the earliest opportunity and at any level without any pre-conditions.

Foreign Minister Mian Khurshood Mahmood Kasuri told reporters in the southern city of Karachi that Pakistan would also urge the United States to help the two nuclear-capable neighbours to resolve their dispute over the Himalayan Kashmir region.

His remarks came in the wake of a recent announcement by US officials that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage might visit India and Pakistan in the next several weeks.

"I would ask Armitage to please evolve a mechanism (to resolve this dispute)," Kasuri said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan told a news conference in Islamabad that Pakistan welcomed Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's statement last week suggesting outstanding issues between the two countries should be resolved through talks.

"We hope that immediate steps will be taken so that the dialogue process can start," Khan said. "Dialogue can start only when there are no pre-conditions attached to it."

Vajpayee said in Srinagar, capital of Indian-controlled Kashmir, that he wanted talks to begin as soon as possible but Islamabad should first give up "cross-border infiltration."

Khan said Pakistan had always maintained that nothing of "this sort"

was happening but if New Delhi wanted, it could agree to neutral observers or United Nations observers to check whether any infiltration was taking place across the Line of Control.

The Line of Control divides disputed Kashmir between Pakistan and India. New Delhi accuses Islamabad of sending Islamic militants across the ceasefire line to participate in a revolt against its rule, but Pakistan denies the charge.

Khan said Pakistan was ready for talks at any level and anywhere. "India will not find us wanting ... it can start tomorrow, it can be in Islamabad, it can be in Delhi," he added.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali and Kasuri had both welcomed Vajpayee's statement over the weekend.



PHOTO: STAR

The road leading to the Karwan Bazar kitchen market has been lying pothole-strewn and water-filled for long, posing troubles to commuters.

# Call to repeal Official Secrecy Act

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a seminar yesterday demanded repeal of the Official Secrecy Act in the interest of free flow of information in society.

Terming the law as 'an anachronism', they said it was originally promulgated in 1923 to check leakage of state information by government officials and rein in espionage.

Though the law is not meant for journalists, it hampers their access to information, they observed.

The seminar on "Official Secrecy Act: Journalists' Access to Information" was jointly organised by the Mass Line Media Center (MMC) and Bangladesh Crime Reporter's Association (CRAB) at the Press Club.

Presenting the keynote paper, Robaet Ferdous, assistant professor of mass communication and journalism at Dhaka University, said suppression of information by government officials and even some NGO's and private organisations were commonplace in Bangladesh.

Dr Golam Rahman of Dhaka University said journalist and the common man were denied access to information under the blanket coverage of the law.

Shaymol Dutta of the Bhore Kagoj said the law was not scrapped to block the coverage of corruption of bureaucrats and politicians.

Former law, justice and parliamentary affairs minister Abdul Matin Khasru said if there were accountability and transparency in administration, the law would not be a hurdle to journalists' access to information.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary

Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed said the law was not a bar to journalists' access to information as it applied to government servants.

He however, said with the passage of a right to information act there would be no barrier to journalists in future despite the secrecy act.

"Freedom of the press is prevailing and we have to work to maintain it," he said.

Among others, noted journalist ABM Musa, CRAB President Harunur Rashid and MMC Executive Director Kamrul Islam Manju spoke on the occasion.

# Gas cylinder blast kills 2 in Sitakunda

UNB, Chittagong

Two labourers were killed and five others injured in a gas cylinder explosion at Sitakunda ship breaking yard yesterday evening.

Police said the explosion occurred when the labourers of Rahman Ship Breaking Yard were cutting abandoned ships with gas, leaving seven of them injured.

They were taken to Chittagong Medical College Hospital where Mohammad Shafiq, 25, of Gaibandha, and Abul Kalam, 30, of Chuadanga, died. The condition of three others was stated to be critical.

# Poor bids

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vulnerable at the current 2.5 lakh MT - six lakh MT down from the government-set critical food-security level.

Sources said four firms participated in the tender for supply of one lakh MT of wheat. Twelve more tender documents were dropped for supply of one lakh MT of rice.

After scrutiny, the authorities found only one proposal for wheat supply and three for rice 'responsive.'

But yesterday's meeting found that the lowest prices quoted by the firms for both rice and wheat were significantly higher -- \$5 for rice and \$25 for wheat -- than the prices some countries offered to the government last month.

These offers by the rice and wheat producing countries were rejected by the cabinet committee on the ground that their prices were higher than the international prices.

As a result, the government floated the tender on March 31 for import of grains.

As the import procedure gets delayed, food officials are trying to make the current domestic wheat procurement drive a success after the failure of the aman procurement drive.

The aman drive failed partly because of production shortfall in last aman season and a delayed start.

# Budget

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staffin revenue expenditure.

Similarly, many departments and projects have grown with individual engineering sections. As a result, some key organisations like the Roads and Highways and the Public Works Department are under-utilised. These organisations have huge manpower and big budgets, and the expenditure obligations can be cut down by lumping their tasks into one or a few institutions.

In the rationalisation process, another thinking doing the round is to forego many of the tasks that are not rewarding revenue-wise like realising tolls from bridges. These may be given to private hands.

For new projects, the government will walk clear of earlier practices -- recruiting staff of the whole organogram when the scheme conceived. Rather, only the essential staff will be recruited for any new project and more people will be added on to it as the project progresses.

Another critical decision -- almost already taken -- is to steer projects with full government funds out of the ADP way. Only those with foreign assistance will make into the ADP and the rest will be placed in revenue budget. This will make a much slimmer ADP next year an oft-reiterated wish of the donors.

The other visible benefit would be to avoid costs through taking up new project staff and later facing pressure of absorbing the redundant people.

When it comes to decide where the money will come for the next budget, the government has no other option but to depend crucially on internal resource mobilisation.

It is being planned to increase various non-NBR tax rates which essentially includes various types of registration fees from car to land to apartment and other types of duties.

# Iraqis sceptical about Garner

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and it takes a long time. We will help you as long as you want us to."

But not all were convinced. "I want to cry, because these are only words," said a doctor who gave her name as Iman. "If they give us anything it is not from their own pockets. It is from our oil," she said.

"Saddam Hussein was an unjust ruler, but maybe one day we could have got rid of him, and not had these foreigners come in to our country."

**RUSSIAN INSISTENCE**

Russia will insist on UN arms inspectors declaring Iraq free of weapons of mass destruction before sanctions against it can be lifted, Itar-Tass news agency quoted a senior foreign ministry official as saying.

The unnamed official said the chief weapons inspector Hans Blix, who headed UN inspectors in Iraq prior to the US-led invasion of the country, should be allowed to return and quickly finish the work.

Further strife is looming between Washington and Russia, which fiercely opposed the US-led war, after senior US defence adviser Richard

Perle said in an interview that Moscow was likely to lose rights to Iraqi oil contracts signed under Saddam's regime.

**FACING PROSECUTION**

As American forces hunt some 50 most wanted from Iraq's toppled regime, there are potentially thousands more former government assassins, torturers and other enforcers of Saddam Hussein's rule who also remain at large.

Catching these lower-level operatives -- and ultimately putting them on trial -- promises to be a massive and lengthy undertaking.

The administration is planning prosecutions for alleged war crimes committed during this war as well as the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Cases also are expected to be pursued for alleged atrocities committed over decades by Iraq's government against its citizens.

**TOXIC AGENT**

US military experts hunting for illegal weapons in Iraq have found precursors to a banned toxic agent and say it is the most important such discovery since the start of the US-led war, the New York Times reported yesterday.

A US military team found the substance buried in the sand thanks to information provided by an Iraqi scientist who said he had worked in Iraq's chemical weapons' program for more than a decade, the daily said.

The report described the chemicals as "precursors for a toxic agent that is banned by chemical weapons treaties," and said the scientist claimed to have buried them in his backyard and elsewhere as evidence of Iraq's weapons programme.

**GRAVES**

Nearly 1,000 political prisoners lie buried in secret graves at a cemetery on the western outskirts of Baghdad, the cemetery's manager and a gravedigger told AFP while displaying remains of the corpses.

"The Baath regime has gone and now we can talk freely with you," the manager, Mohyemeed Aswad, told AFP.

"They are all political. Ten to 15 bodies would arrive at a time from the Abu Ghraib prison and we would bury them here," he said, adding that the last corpse interred there was number 993.

# Rain calls final shot

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drinks break. But when play resumed and Andrew Hall had delivered his first ball, rain drove the cricketers off the field.

The groundsman spent two-and-a-half hours battling to make the ground playable after the 25-minute downpour. The organisers even flew in a chopper to dry out the wet areas.

But the combined effort of technology and human endeavor could not win over nature.

With the crowd anticipating a curtailed match after match referee West Indian Clive Lloyd inspected the ground, the heavens opened again. And everybody knew it was game over.

"It was disappointing. But I have reasons to be happy. We have come a long way in this tournament and there were a lot of positives at this stage. And we have two Test matches ahead of us to carry on the momentum.

It's hard to say what would have happened, but obviously in seventeen overs we had India in trouble. The match had along way to go, but we pushed them," said South African Graeme Smith.

"And today the guys were magnificent in the first 15 overs. I think that put India under serious pressure. Then the rain came to stop play," said the 22-

year-old Smith after the presentation ceremony.

South Africa and India both won a game each in the preliminary stage.

"I'm very happy we have come a long way from the first game as a team. We have learnt certain things and we are starting to play the kind of cricket that we know we can play."

"After the one heavy defeat against India we came back fighting with the bowlers adapting to the conditions quickly. It feels good to put India under pressure on their own kind of conditions," he added.

Medium-pacer Allan Dawson was the pick of the South African bowlers, claiming 11 wickets in the competition.

Man-of-the-series Dawson said that the secret of his success was his ability to mix his pace with slower deliveries and not bowling seam up on the slow wickets here.

Ganguly did not appear for the post-match briefing.

The India team will fly home today.

South Africa on the other hand will stay in the city for another day before heading for Chittagong, where they will play the first Test against Bangladesh on April 24. **(SCORE-BOARD ON PAGE 13)**

# Shazneen

FROM PAGE 1

including the victim's father Latifur Rahman has been completed till now with the hearing adjourned till April 29.

The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act provides for trial of such cases within 90 days.

Cross-examination of only one witness was recorded in the first four years after the sensational murder.

The trial is taking such a long time due to delay in completing cross-examination of the witnesses, said the lawyers concerned. But in the last one year, it has been expedited and the judgement of the case is likely in the next few months.

The witnesses cross-examined included Shajneen's father Latifur Rahman, two sisters -- Simeen Hossain and Shahzreh Haq Shehizbrother-in-law Arshad-ul-Haq and five friends of the victim's father.

The witnesses described in court the brutality of the rape and killing.

Special Public Prosecutor Arfan Uddin Khan, ABM Sharfuddin Khan Mukul and Mahbub Ahmed appeared for the state. Advocates Mosharaf Hossain Kajol, MA Kamrul Hasan Khan Aslam defended the accused.

Latifur Rahman filed a murder case

with the Gulshan Police Station on April 24, 1998, accusing Shahidul Islam alias Shahid, a domestic help at his residence.

ASP of the CID Mojibur Rahman filed a rape case with the same police station, accusing six persons -- Shahid, Hasan, Shaniram, Badal, Minu and Parvin -- after six months of investigation into the Shazneen murder case.

All the six accused are now in jail.

The case was transferred to the Second Special Tribunal for Prevention of Women and Children Repression, Dhaka last year.

Judge Mohammad Shah Alam Mia of the Special Court for Women and Children Repression Prevention, Dhaka, on May 20, 2000 framed charges against Shahidul Islam alias Shahid as the main accused for rape of Shazneen. Syed Sazzad Moin Uddin Hasan alias Hasan, the alleged mastermind, Badal, Shaniram Mondol, Parveen and Estema Khatun alias Minu have been charged with abetting the crime.

The murder case, pending with the First Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court, Dhaka was earlier stayed by an order of the Supreme Court. The order will remain valid till disposal of the rape case.

# Media campaign stressed for AIDS awareness

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Mass media campaign should be undertaken and more chapters included in textbooks to increase public awareness about HIV/AIDS, speakers observed at a discussion yesterday.

People have misconceptions about HIV/AIDS which need to be removed through extensive campaigning and better access to information on reproductive health, they said.

The 'International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)' was organised by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Bangladesh with technical support by the Khan Foundation (KF). It was held at the KF auditorium. The focus of the discussion was the organisation's 10-year report on Bangladesh.

To check the alarming increase in the country's population, the prevalence of contraceptives should be brought to about 72 percent,

said M Fazlur Rahman, secretary of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). He was also the chief guest at the ceremony.

The secretary said integrated efforts of the government and the Non Government Organisations (NGOs) are needed.

Rahman also underscored active participation by the local government.

Suneta Mukherjee, representative of the UNFPA, who attended as special guest, stressed on the need to plan well before implementing awareness programmes on reproductive health.

Janet P Jackson, deputy representa-

tive of UNFPA, Bangladesh, made suggestions for better a monitoring process in this regard.

Among others, Shaikh Khurshid Alam, deputy secretary of the MoHFW, Advocate Rokhsana Khondaker, chairperson of Khan Foundation, also spoke on the occasion.

The ICPD Bangladesh report covers 10 sections including population and development, gender equality and women empowerment, reproductive rights and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS.

UNFPA Headquarters is coordinating a global review to assess progress and constraints at the country level on ICPD commitments. In Bangladesh, MoHFW has led this exercise, with the help of other related ministries and NGOs.

The formal review of ICPD 10 years country level progress report by the UNFPA will be held at New York in 2004.

# Buriganga

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caused by polythene bags, and opening up of the old channel to restore navigability of the river also need to be implemented, the meeting observed.

The taskforce had suggested to the government to implement a 31-point recommendation to save the river Buriganga and other rivers. Accordingly, the cabinet division empowered a high-powered committee to implement the recommendations.

# Rejoinder

FROM PAGE 1

energy sector are registered under Company Act and shareholders appoint the boards of directors and the appointments are ratified by the Annual General Meeting. In these cases, government is the 100 per cent shareholder of these companies and government also appoints the directors of these boards. Recently, the government has decided that all these companies will be fully autonomous and run under Company Act. There should not be interference from any quarter and accordingly government as shareholder is reconstituting the board.

In this process, these three companies namely Gas Transmission Co. Ltd (GTCL), Rupantarita Praktik Gas Co. Ltd (RPGCL) and Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Co. Ltd (TGTDCL) have been reconstituted and other companies' boards will be reconstituted soon.

While reconstituting these boards, the government has decided to include the experts in the relevant fields, educationists, representatives from business community and officials of the government and Petrobangla.

The Senior Asst. Secretaries who have been appointed in two boards are sufficiently experienced and directly involved in the activities of the companies. Moreover, the insertion of Sr. Asst. Secretaries in the boards is not unprecedented."

**Our Reply:**

The memorandum and articles of association of these companies clearly mentions "Petrobangla (Government" as the authority to appoint new directors at the "general meeting". Whereas, the rejoinder repeatedly refers to the "Government" as the authority that reconstituted the boards and clearly avoided saying which organ of the government it was. In

addition, Petro-bangla is the shareholder of the nine companies on behalf of the government --not the Energy Ministry. The rejoinder appears to treat Petrobangla as a third party.

The intent of this reconstitution of the boards are clear from the fact that these were done after the April 6 meeting where the Cabinet discussed that interference by other organs of the government into the affairs of the nine companies of Petrobangla had hindered their growth. It decided that both Petrobangla and Energy Ministry would ensure autonomy and financial freedom of these companies.

But the ministry ignored this decision by reconstituting the boards of GTCL, Titas and RPGCL by unilaterally issuing notification on board reshuffles. Petrobangla, which is the direct shareholder, was totally ignored. The 'ratification' at the general meeting does not go along with the spirit of the April 6 decisions. The ministry's intent comes more under question because a special general meeting of Titas was held only about 10 days ago. If the reconstitution of the board was so urgent, it could have been placed there.

The whole process raises many questions -- should the 'government' appoint directors from business groups who have direct business interest in the organisation. The recent appointment in Bangladesh Energy Association raises serious questions of propriety.

The selection of an outside 'expert' as a board member raised further questions.

The Senior Asstt Secretaries may be experienced and efficient. But are they senior enough to become directors? Concern in this regard was expressed in the April 6 Cabinet meeting.

# Syria-US tension

FROM PAGE 1

Fort Hood army base in Texas.

His administration had increased pressure on Damascus, charging that Syria possessed chemical weapons, had smuggled military equipment into Iraq and provided a safe haven for associates of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Shara said the two countries had nonetheless maintained a dialogue, saying it hadn't always "brought about tangible results, but it was there".

He maintained that for the past 20 years, Syria had worked for a just and comprehensive peace in the region, claiming his country had been "a stabilising factor in the Middle East".

Damascus did not back Baghdad during its 1980 invasion of Iran, nor that of Kuwait 10 years later, and had supported the 1989 Taef accord which put an end to civil war in Lebanon, the foreign minister noted.

Palacio said there had been "no Spanish mediation between Syria and the USA. Syro-American relations don't need an intermediary."

Shereferred to the US charges, saying: "Statements against Syria do not reflect the Spanish view. My government thinks that some statements are not helpful."

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, one of Washington's staunchest supporters over the war in Iraq, said last week that Syria would not be the target of military action and that the conflict in Iraq should not spread to neighbouring

countries.

Palacio said Monday: "Syria and Spain share a pragmatic attitude and want to create a common ground to work for the future and welfare of Iraq."

"Syria proved to be responsible, pragmatic and constructive in the UN Security Council in voting the 1441 resolution" which mandated arms inspectors in November to search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Syria is currently the only Arab member on the UN Security Council, and Spain holds a non-permanent seat there as well.

The Spanish foreign minister discussed the regional situation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, after which the official Sana agency said both had agreed the United Nations should have a role in working for world peace.

Palacio and Assad had called for "the UN to regain its effective and positive role for security and peace in the world," Sana reported.

"Syria supports solutions which guarantee the interests of Arab people and resolutions on international legality," it quoted Assad as saying.

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin is expected in the region for talks this week, while US Secretary of State Colin Powell has intimated he will visit Damascus on a Middle East tour in the near future.

# Chalabi

FROM PAGE 12

meticulous about his security, probably made his escape plans long ago and could be hiding anywhere from in a cave in Iraq to a luxury villa in Libya.

"I would start with the question of his he still alive? If he is alive, then I don't think that he is still in Iraq," said Jawad al-Anani, a former foreign minister of Jordan who is now a political consultant based in the United Arab Emirates.

"I don't think he's in Syria either. Even if he did go, I don't think he's stay very long as the Syrians, with all the pressure they're under, won't keep him."

Anani said Saddam would probably choose to hide in a large populated place where he could remain incognito and that he was unlikely to go to any country that had anything to gain from handing him over or having him killed.

He said need not be in the Arab world, and cited Sudan and Afghanistan as possible destinations. Both countries have had links with bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

"He's a careful man. He won't go somewhere where he can be recognised or easily captured," Anani said. "He might have a chance in a large Islamic country, maybe Afghanistan."

# Criminal Kamal murdered in Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Sonadanga police yesterday recovered the body of notorious criminal 'Hat Kata' Kamal, 25, from an abandoned house at Bakhshipara.

He had been missing since last Saturday.

Police said Kamal might have been killed by his accomplices following a rivalry over drug trade.

Police further said he lost his right hand in an armed attack on January this year near Yusuf Oil Mill at Sher-e-Bangla road under Khulna thana.

# Petrobangla

**FROM PAGE 12**

Petrobangla had hindered their growth and curbed administrative and financial autonomy.

The cabinet decided that the energy ministry and Petrobangla would ensure zero interference in the affairs of the companies including Titas, GTCL and RPGCL.

But the ministry overlooked the cabinet decision within a week and went on its own to shuffle the boards through issuance of a notice.

Again, the legal structure empowers only Petrobangla to shuffle the boards at a general meeting.

Donors have been pressuring the government for long to restructure these companies by giving autonomy, among other things, to make these entities more efficient.

The government late last year signed a loan agreement with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the Clean Fuel Project. The government then gave its word that these gas companies would be restructured.

# BNP leader

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January 12 this year as a listed criminal but was released after twenty days.

Police recovered a foreign made pistol and a magazine loaded with six bullets from the place of occurrence. Motive behind the murder could not be known till yesterday evening.

According to some businessmen of Phultala bazar, Noor Hossain was given death threats several times by PBCP armed cadres for joining BNP.

Sources on condition of anonymity said Noor Hossain recently helped police arrest Mukul Biswas, a top leader of Tapan faction of PBCP from Khulna city. Mukul Biswas is younger brother of PBCP's ringleader Shimul.

Two persons named Lutfar Rahman and Mashur Rahman of Dakkhindhi village under Phultala thana were arrested as suspects. No case was filed in connection with the murder till 5 pm yesterday.