

# Pak attitude changing on Kashmir: India

## Jamali telephones Vajpayee, invites him to Islamabad

AFP, New Delhi

India Tuesday acknowledged that Pakistan's attitude towards its estranged neighbour was changing, but stressed that talks could be resumed only after militancy ended in the disputed state of Kashmir.

The comments came a day after Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali telephoned his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee and invited him to Islamabad for peace talks.

Vajpayee's ruling BJP party was in a huddle Tuesday over the surprise chain of events, but a key cabinet colleague of the premier said the talks with rival Pakistan could occur after the bloodletting in Kashmir ended.

"Our consistent policy had been that we will not talk (with Pakistan) until cross border terrorism ended -- but there has been one change in Pakistan's attitude," Junior Home Minister I.D. Swami told reporters.

"Earlier they were saying that they will talk only on Kashmir but now they are ready for talks on other issues also," Swami said.

But the minister, who is in charge of India's internal security including the battle against insurgency in disputed Kashmir, re-stated India's earlier

position. "We and also the international community expect a conductive atmosphere will be created and only then there will be talks," Swami said.

His comments came as Indian police said they had foiled an attempt by a group of Islamic militants early Tuesday to infiltrate into Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani zone of the disputed state.

11 militants and four soldiers died in the clash, in the Barat Nala area of Doda, about 180 km southeast of Indian Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, a police spokesman said.

India blames Pakistan for the flow of Islamic guerrillas from Pakistan-ruled Kashmir into the Indian zone of the disputed state and also accuses Islamabad of arming and training the rebels.

Pakistan, which has fought two of its three wars with India over Kashmir since 1947, denies the charges but extends moral and diplomatic support to what it argues is the Kashmiris' just struggle for self-rule.

More than 38,000 people have died in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, since the launch of the anti-Indian rebellion in the Himalayan territory in 1989.

A spokesman for Vajpayee's BJP party said the issue of militancy had come up during the 10-minute long-distance conversation by the two prime ministers.

Jamali's telephone call followed comments made by Vajpayee on April 18 during a tour of Kashmir, when he offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan. During Monday's talks the two leaders agreed to consider issues like restoring air and sporting links, which snapped after India blamed Pakistan for a deadly attack on its New Delhi parliament complex in December 2001.

India's main opposition Congress party scoffed at the peace initiatives.

"Terrorism is at its height in Kashmir and they want talks. This government has no direction and this is sorely disappointing," Congress leader Kapil Sibal told AFP.

# India test fires Prithvi

AFP, New Delhi

India on Tuesday test-fired a medium range surface-to-surface Prithvi missile from a site in eastern Orissa state, a defence ministry spokesman said.

"It was successful. The army version of the missile was test-fired," the spokesman told AFP.

He said the missile had a range of 150 km. The Prithvi missile has three separate versions for the army, navy, and the air force. Prithvi's navy and air force versions have an extended range of 250 kilometres.

The spokesman said that the missile was test-fired at 11.20 am (0550 GMT). Officials said the test was part of ongoing efforts to fine tune the missile, which has already been inducted into the army.

The 8.5 metre (28 foot) Prithvi missile was last test fired on March 26, when archival Pakistan responded by firing its Abdali missile. Prithvi, which means Earth, can be tipped with incendiary and fragmentary munitions or can carry a sub-kiloton nuclear warhead for use on massed troops or armoured formations.

The version of the missile test-fired Tuesday has the latest on-board computer and navigation system and can use both solid and liquid propellant.



A picture of a man who has disappeared during the US-led war on Iraq, is shown by a relative visiting the shrine of Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Islam's Prophet Mohammad (SM), in Iraq's holy Shiite city of Najaf, some 180 km south of Baghdad on Monday. Iraqi leaders from across the political spectrum met US officials Monday in a gathering aimed at preparing the way towards an interim government, as thousands of Shiites marched in the capital to demand more influence over the country's future.



Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (R) sits next to Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa (L) during the ASEAN summit on SARS at the foreign ministry in Bangkok on Tuesday. Thailand is hosting a rare half-day summit attended by leaders of the ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations members, plus China, to discuss ways to deal with the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, which has claimed 333 lives globally and infected more than 5,400 people. China and Hong Kong have the highest death tolls from SARS, 148 and 150 respectively -- over three-quarters of the global total.

# SARS fear forces foreign students to flee Beijing

AFP, Beijing

Japan and South Korea have issued rare travel advisories telling students in the Chinese capital to return home because of the deadly disease SARS, embassy officials said Tuesday.

The Japanese advisory was posted on the embassies websites Monday night and targeted students living in Beijing.

"We advised all students to return home as soon as possible if they don't have any special duties in Beijing," said a Japanese diplomat.

He said the recommendation was the first such advisory by the embassy to Japanese citizens since the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown 14 years ago, when tanks and troops

crushed pro-democracy protests in the city.

"We considered many factors. Beijing's situation is very serious, especially in the colleges. We've heard of colleges that have SARS cases and have been closed," said the diplomat who declined to be identified.

Some 3,000 Japanese students are studying in Beijing, he said, but did not know how many of them had fled.

The South Korean embassy in Beijing issued a similar advisory last Wednesday, an embassy official said.

By Tuesday night, 69 percent of the approximately 13,000 South Korean students studying in Beijing would have left, the official said.

"Some 7,000 students already left.

Most of them left last week," he said. "Many of the universities have already closed or suspended classes, so if they don't go to class, why should they stay here?"

Students from South Korea and Japan make up the bulk of the foreign student population in Beijing.

About 80 percent of the American students in Beijing have also deserted the capital, the Japanese diplomat said, citing information he said his embassy received from the US embassy.

Many students from various countries last week were seen at the Beijing international airport fleeing the capital, worried about contracting SARS.

# Things remain same in Iraqi hospital

THE STAR/ANN, Basra

For Dr Ahmad Abdul Hassan of Basra Hospital, the British troops' claim that things are improving is a late April Fool's joke.

"They are doing their job to get things going but they are too slow. It would be a disaster if things remained at this pace," said the senior house officer of the surgical department, who represented the hospital's director.

He said the absence of security in the area made it difficult for any kind of administrative system to be put in place.

Some medical staff had quit, he said, as it was not safe to come to work and they were not paid salaries anyway. This was the same with the water purification plants which malfunctioned due to looting when the troops brought down the Saddam Hussein government.

"We are in a bad situation with regards to water supply and sanitation. Engineers are reluctant to repair the plants with the absence of security, transport and salaries.

"They (US-led troops) had given us promises and hope at the start, but it's just an April Fool's joke. They have done nothing to address the issues of safety, political security and stability."

Dr Ahmad said that while British and Kuwaiti tankers had been on the streets

to supply clean drinking water for the people, this was only a "charade".

"They are not liberating forces. They are aggressors and want to create a better image by trying to fix something here and there," he said.

Iraq, he said, did not want to depend on the British or Kuwait for water.

It was illogical, he said, for the country of the great Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to depend on Kuwait for drinking water when Iraq, with its abundant water resources, should be the one supplying to the other Gulf countries.

"We do not need charity or donations. We have a fortune of US\$30bil (RM115bil) under the oil-for-food programme. So just lift the embargo, release the money and let us Iraqis live freely. We can fix everything ourselves," he said.

He said that in 1991 when the US hit every bridge and power plant in Iraq during the Gulf War, it took only three years to rebuild the country.

"So we do not want the British bringing us aid, supply and advice," he said.

Dr Ahmad said those who welcomed the troops into the country had been brainwashed and would later discover the truth of how they had replaced a dictatorship with "something worse."

# Iraqis demand quick formation of govt

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders have agreed to try to form an interim government within a month, as thousands of Shiites rallied to demand more influence over the country's future.

The Baghdad meeting of around 250 delegates with Jay Garner, the retired US general running Iraq, took place Monday, on the 66th birthday of toppled president Saddam Hussein, whose fate and whereabouts remain a mystery.

It also coincided with a trip to the Gulf by US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who said US forces in the region could now be reduced. Delegates in Baghdad reached an agreement to hold a national congress within four weeks to elect the first Iraqi government since the fall of Saddam's regime on April 9, although the assembly was split over the duration of the US occupation of Iraq.

"Hopefully, we will have this national meeting that will select or elect the interim authority," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the US envoy to Iraq's emerging political movements.

"The decision here was to do the government within four weeks.

There's a strong message to the coalition from the participants that an Iraqi government needs to be formed as quickly as possible," he said.

Shiite and Sunni religious leaders, Kurdish officials, tribal dignitaries, farmers and businessmen joined longtime exiles at the meeting, the second in a series of gatherings to map Iraq's political destiny.

"It is our responsibility to start the process of the birth of democracy in Iraq here today," Garner told the assembly.

But there were sharp divisions within the assembly over the duration of the US occupation and the role Islam should play in a new government.

While some, including many exiles, appeared to favour a quick US exit, others who endured Saddam's brutal rule were sceptical over their own readiness to lead the nation.

"We here prefer the Americans to rule us in the interim period. We are not ready to handle this yet," said Suheil al-Suheil, a Baghdad lawyer: "Saddam's orphans are still alive."

President George W. Bush vowed

to see Iraq through to democracy and said the US-led occupation was already improving the lives of Iraqis.

"Iraq can be an example of peace and prosperity and freedom to the entire Middle East," he said in a speech to a primarily Arab-American crowd in Dearborn, Michigan where there is a large Iraqi community.

"It'll be a hard journey, but every step of the way, Iraq will have a steady friend in the American people," he said in the speech, aimed as much at the Middle East as the American Midwest.

Yet many Iraqis have expressed frustration over the military occupation by the United States, which has not set a date for its forces to leave.

Tribal leader Hussein Shaan said: "We thank the forces that have freed us from the dictatorship, but now we'd like them to leave as soon as possible."

The Baghdad meeting had tremendous symbolic power for many Iraqis, falling on the day that has normally been reserved for massive state-backed demonstrations to mark Saddam's birthday during his 24-year dictatorship.

# Anti-war European leaders hold defence mini-summit

AFP, Brussels

The leaders of France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg -- who all opposed the US-led war on Iraq -- opened a mini-summit Tuesday in a bid to cement European defence ties.

Critics say the half-day summit, an initiative by Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, risks provoking new rifts in both transatlantic and European relations.

But Verhofstadt told Belgium's RTBF radio his talks with French President Jacques Chirac, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker would yield "real and concrete advances".

"If we want to count on the world stage, if we want to avoid the divisions in the European Union that we saw in the Iraq crisis, it is absolutely necessary to have this European defence tool," he said.

"Otherwise, a European Union foreign policy is not credible."

During their two-hour talks, the leaders were to discuss the creation of an EU armaments agency, an idea already backed by the convention on the future of Europe, the body sketching out an EU constitution.

They were also expected to discuss a "solidarity clause" to be included in the new EU constitution, guaranteeing support in the case of an attack on a member state.

A proposal to create a European defence command headquarters outside Brussels could also be on the table, although the leaders have been at pains to dismiss talk of a European

rival to NATO.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair issued a thinly veiled warning to the participants on the eve of the summit.

"We won't accept, and neither will the rest of Europe, anything that either undermines NATO or conflicts with the basic principles of European defence we've set out," he said.

Along with France, Britain is one of the EU's few military heavyweights, and observers say its armed forces will need to be at the heart of any credible European defence strategy.

Italy, Spain and the Netherlands have also all expressed reservations about the summit, and helped to ensure that neither EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana nor the EU's current Greek presidency attended.

The four participating countries agree that the deep divisions opened up in Europe by the Iraq war underline the need for the EU to put flesh on the bones of its common foreign and security policy.

But the meeting has fuelled talk of a two-speed EU, at a time when the bloc is struggling to build just the opposite, a Union increasingly united in areas other than the purely economic.

Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio, writing in Tuesday's Wall Street Journal Europe, said the mini-summit could do more harm than good.

"A truly European security and defence policy cannot be achieved by three or four countries acting alone," she wrote in an opinion piece entitled "The wrong way to build consensus".

# Inter-Korean talks stalled

AFP, Seoul

High-level talks between North and South Korea on Tuesday stalled at the last minute over South Korea's demand that North Korea scrap its nuclear ambitions.

The two Koreas were to wrap up the first inter-Korean ministerial meeting since President Roh Moo-Hyun took office in South Korea in February, by issuing a joint statement.

The two sides agreed in principle to address the South's concern over the North's nuclear weapons programme in the statement, according to South Korean pool reports from Pyongyang.

But differences over wording hampered progress, with the South pushing for North Korea to commit itself to abandoning its nuclear programme in explicit terms.

The North insists on repeating an earlier statement that the two Koreas will make joint efforts for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear stand-off.

"We need last minute negotia-

# Arafat free to leave, but with 'one-way ticket', says Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will allow Yasser Arafat to leave his headquarters in Ramallah, where he has been effectively trapped for 16 months, but only with a "one-way ticket", a senior official told AFP Tuesday.

"Yasser Arafat cannot hope for more than a one-way ticket, and Israel will not allow him to move around the West Bank and Gaza Strip encouraging terrorism," said the official, who asked not to be named.

"If he wants to go abroad without coming back, he can do so, but he will have to do so alone and leave behind the 200 to 300 terrorists who are with him in the Muqataa," his war-scarred Ramallah base which has twice been besieged by Israeli tanks during the 31-month-old Palestinian uprising.



A man pours fuel into a plastic container for customers in Baghdad on Monday. Iraqis are still suffering from the lack of fuel as well as water and electricity.