

Vajpayee rejects possibilities of going to Pakistan

TIMES NEWS NETWORK, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister has been invited to Pakistan at a time of his choosing, but has not accepted the invitation.

"I was invited to visit Pakistan by the prime minister of that country but I did not accept it," he said, in response to questions at the weekly meeting of the BJP parliamentary party on Tuesday.

The PM's statement that he had "not accepted" the invitation is being interpreted in party and official circles as indicating that the PM meant "not yet". "It is not a blanket no," a BJP MP said.

PTI reports that late at night, the government clarified that the invitation issue figured in a "very general way" between the two leaders and was not pursued

further. "It is not correct to say, as reported in some section of the media, that the PM did not accept the invitation to visit Pakistan, extended by Jamali," an external affairs ministry spokesman said.

"The idea of Vajpayee visiting Pakistan or Jamali coming to India was mentioned by the Pak PM in a very general way," he said.

Meanwhile foreign diplomats in India welcomed the telephonic conversation between the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan and hoped that it would lead to a sustained engagement between the two countries.

German ambassador Heimo Richter termed it "a very significant and hopeful sign" adding: "We share the conviction expressed by Prime Minister Vajpayee, both in Srinagar and in

Parliament, that the existing problems cannot be solved by the gun. They can only be solved by dialogue between India and Pakistan. We encourage all concerned to do whatever possible to reach that end."

The Netherlands embassy also said it welcomed the conversation while a diplomat from the European Union said: "It is a good thing." Asked about the benchmarks set by India for resumption of dialogue, the diplomat said: "There is nothing to suggest they have disappeared. The best way to achieve them is through dialogue."

A senior diplomat from a neighbouring country hoped that the momentum could be maintained. He said his hope was based on the fact that the conversation could not have been sudden or

spontaneous but a well-thought out decision and must have taken place following a lot of behind-the-scenes activity. "A lot of us in the region suffer when these are dips in the relationship between India and Pakistan," he pointed out.

On the other hand, anxious to know in the Lok Sabha from Government as to what were the new developments that prompted Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to offer a hand of friendship to Pakistan, Samata Party, a key partner in the ruling NDA, supported by opposition parties, sought a statement from him.

Raising the issue shortly after the House assembled yesterday morning, Samata Party member Prabhunath Singh said reports had appeared in newspapers that Vajpayee and his Pakistani coun-

terpart had telephonic talks and he was even invited to visit Islamabad.

"We are not against dialogue but there must be some basis for it," he said, recalling that whenever India initiated peace talks, "we had to face problems."

Citing examples, he said when Vajpayee undertook Lahore bus journey, India faced Kargil war and when President Musharraf was invited to Agra for talks, a series of terrorist attacks took place including those on Indian Parliament and J&K Assembly.

"We want to know what is that new situation and new development that has prompted Vajpayee to initiate peace talks," Singh said, demanding "the Prime Minister must take us into confidence."

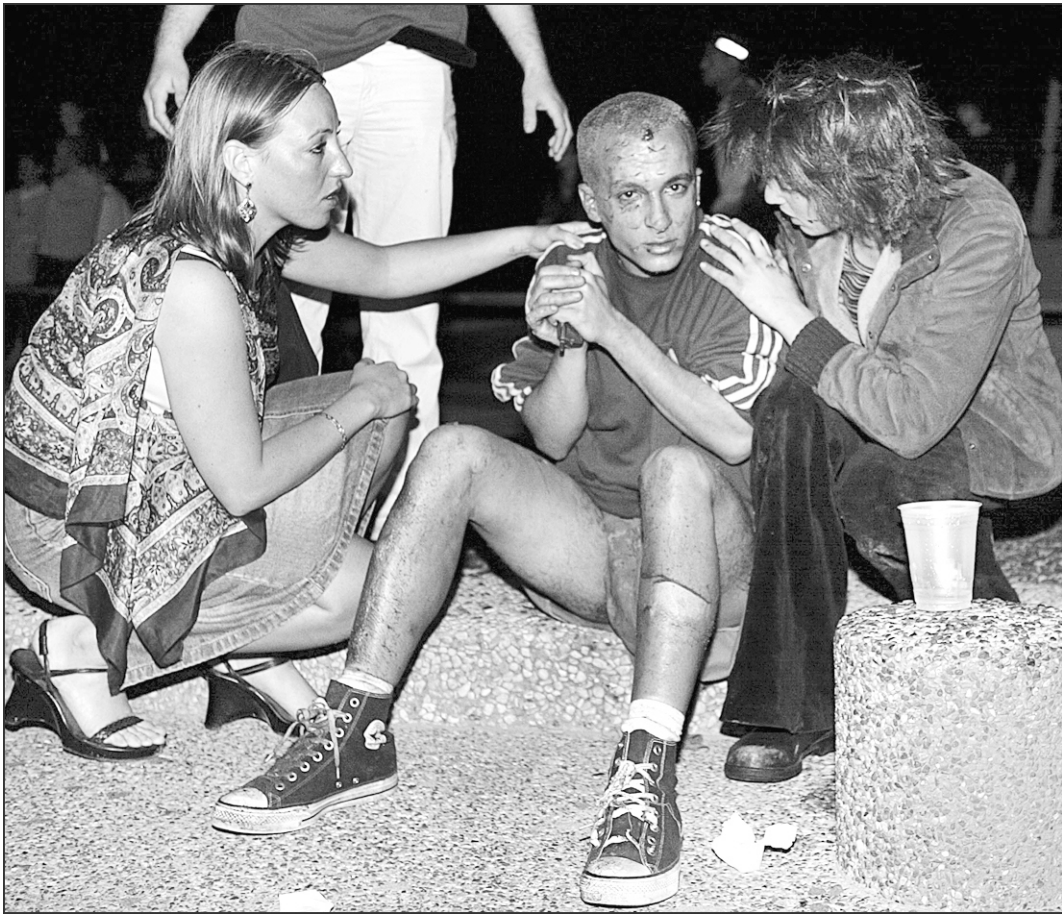


PHOTO: AFP

Israeli women comfort a wounded youngster yesterday, after a suicide bomber blew himself up at the doorway of a beachfront bar called "Mike's Place". The bombing took place just a short distance from the local US embassy. It is reported that three people are dead and some 46 wounded.

Suicide bombing jolts ME peace plan

AFP, Tel Aviv

A suicide bomber linked to Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction killed three people in a busy Tel Aviv bar early yesterday just hours after a moderate Palestinian cabinet was voted in, blasting hopes for an international peace plan and piling huge pressure on the new ministers.

Three Palestinians were also killed by the Israeli army in the occupied territories, sparking fears that the 31-month-old intifada was entering a new phase of escalation, following several weeks of relative calm.

A much heavier death toll was averted in Tel Aviv when a second security guard gave his life in as many weeks, preventing the explosives-laden Palestinian from entering Mike's Place, a late night bar teeming with Israelis and tourists on the seafont. He finally blew himself up at the entrance of the bar, killing himself and three other people, and wounding dozens.

The blast came only hours after the investiture by the Palestinian parliament in the West Bank town of Ramallah of the moderate Mahmud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, as the first ever Palestinian prime minister.

Abbas, 68, in a powerful and ambitious speech as the session opened, promised to tackle rampant Palestinian violence.

Abbas's call for a collection of unauthorised weapons met with flat rejection from hardline Islamist factions Hamas and Islamic Jihad and scepticism from many, including some of his own supporters.

Hamas's military wing and an armed offshoot of Arafat and Abbas's Fatah faction jointly claimed the suicide attack in Tel Aviv.

According to the Haaretz daily, Israel's military intelligence does not rate the new prime minister's chances of preventing radical groups from repeating their operations and warned that Arafat remained the boss.

"He may have opposed the violent intifada from the first day, but he's barely a third of the new political framework in the Palestinian Authority. The other two thirds are Yasser Arafat and the terror organisations, which continue to support violence," the daily quoted military sources as saying.

And Palestinian officials warned Tuesday that Abu Mazen's hopes of disarming militants across the West Bank and especially the Islamic stronghold of Gaza would never materialise if the Israeli army maintained its occupation of the territories.

The army, which has often responded militarily to suicide

bombings, was expected to give Abbas's new administration a little breathing space and refrain from carrying out another devastating raid.

But it nevertheless continued its operations in autonomous Palestinian land Wednesday, killing three Palestinians.

An unidentified Palestinian was killed in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah Wednesday morning in circumstances which remained to be determined, Palestinian security sources said.

Two militants from radical leftist Palestinian groups were shot dead by Jewish settlers and Israeli soldiers when attempting to infiltrate a settlement near the northern West Bank city of Nablus, sources close to the settlers said.

The United States condemned the suicide attack as a "cowardly" act, but despite the spiralling violence, insisted it would press on with the much-awaited publication of the roadmap -- an internationally-drafted blueprint for resuming Israeli-Palestinian talks.

"Attacks such as these will not deter us -- and the proponents of peace throughout the region -- from continuing down the path on which we have embarked," said US State Department spokeswoman Nancy Beck.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian Muslim members from the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) party shout slogans as their leader Abu Bakar Bashir is escorted by police to court in Jakarta yesterday.

Alleged terrorist group leader denies all charges

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir began his defence yesterday against accusations that he leads a deadly Islamic terror network, saying God would be his judge.

"I testify that there is no other absolute ruler, protector or judge except Allah," the white-robed Bashir, who allegedly heads the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network, told the five judges. "There is no source of law except Allah."

A calm Bashir denied the accusations and urged the court not to be swayed by domestic or foreign pressure, saying that judges who passed fair verdicts would go to heaven while those who did not would go to hell.

He called for a trial "free from political intervention or the intervention of the powers of the government or the intervention of the

subjective interests of parties outside Indonesia."

Bashir is formally charged with treason -- waging a JI jihad, or holy war to topple the government and set up an Islamic state.

JI, which is thought linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, is suspected of staging the bombing of two Bali nightspots which killed 202 people last October and a string of other bloody attacks in the region.

Bashir, who is not accused of involvement in the Bali blasts, described accusations against him as "inhuman", in a short statement before his lawyers began addressing the court.

About 70 white-clad supporters demonstrated outside but there were no clashes.

"The government should not bow to foreign pressure," one of

them shouted through a loud-speaker.

About 100 police imposed tight security and blocked off the court approach road.

The case is seen as a test of Indonesia's commitment to fighting extremism but Bashir has dismissed it as "slander made up by the United States."

Prosecutors say the 64-year-old cleric co-founded JI in 1993 in Malaysia.

In an indictment, they say he authorised the Christmas Eve bombings of churches and priests in 2000 which killed 19 people in Indonesia.

He is said to have approved a plot to bomb US interests in Singapore, which was foiled with the arrest of 13 JI suspects there.

N Korea hints at owning nuclear weapons

AFP, Seoul

North Korea in a foreign ministry statement hinted publicly yesterday that it was developing nuclear weapons, saying US hostility had compelled it to opt for "a necessary deterrent force."

The statement, by a foreign ministry spokesman, was seen as a further indication that the Stalinist state possessed a nuclear arsenal.

"The reality requires the DPRK (North Korea) to deter the escalating US moves to stifle the DPRK with a physical force, compels it to opt for possessing a necessary deterrent force and put it into practice," the statement said.

In a different dispatch, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) also hinted at nuclear capability when it said the United States should scrap its nuclear weapons before North Korea followed suit.

"The US which possesses the biggest number of nuclear weapons in the world and poses a constant threat to other sovereign countries

with them should scrap its nuclear program before such a small country as the DPRK does," KCNA said.

The spokesman asserted North Korea should possess the "means" to counter a US preemptive nuclear attack on the Stalinist country.

"How can the possession of means by such a small country as the DPRK for just self-defence ... be 'threat' and 'blackmail'?" it said.

He also warned Washington against taking the nuclear issue to the United Nations.

"If the US finally brings up the nuclear issue for discussion at the UN and abuses its name again, the DPRK will be left with no option but to consider taking practical measures to cope with an emergency," he said.

"Whether the Korean peninsula becomes denuclearized or not will entirely depend on the US policy," the spokesman said.

KCNA went further to say that North Korea would regard any US attempt to seek a UN resolution on sanctions as the "green light" for war.

China builds special hospital for SARS

AFP, Xiaotangshan

An army of workers put the final touches yesterday to a hospital erected in barely a week to house a rapidly increasing number of Chinese patients infected with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

Nearly 7,000 construction workers have been toiling since April 23 to build the hospital in rural Changping county on Beijing's northern outskirts which is expected to hold up to 1,000 SARS and suspected SARS patients.

"Everything is finished, we have been ordered to start cleaning up the site and move out the construction team," a construction official named Wang told AFP.

Completion of the new facility comes after acting Beijing mayor Wang Qishan said the SARS epidemic in the capital was severe and

that there was a lack of vacant hospital beds in the capital.

According to the Beijing SARS Prevention and Control Center 19 medical facilities have been designated as SARS hospitals but at least three of them have been sealed off with no new patients being accepted.

There will be 1,200 medical workers in the hospital, all from military hospitals, it said, adding that from Thursday the hospital would be isolated to ensure the surrounding environment will not be affected.

Construction was spearheaded by the Beijing Number Six Construction Company which was contracted by the city government to build a hospital capable of handling 350 patients last Wednesday, but was told to increase the capacity to 1,000 patients over the weekend.



PHOTO: AFP

A worker from the Dazhong public transportation company, wearing a protective mask, disinfects seats on a bus in Shanghai yesterday. China yesterday reported 11 new deaths from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and 166 new cases, bringing the death toll nationwide to 159 and the cumulative number of cases to 3,460.