

Pakistan for no-war pact after end of Kashmir row

Islamabad ready to lose nukes if Delhi does

PTI, AP, Islamabad

Amid fresh peace overtures by India and Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf has said his country could work for a no-war pact with India followed by mutual reduction of troops and denuclearisation of South Asia if the Kashmir issue was resolved.

If the Kashmir issue was resolved and there was peace and security in the region, South Asia could be de-nuclearised mutually by India and Pakistan, Musharraf said in an interview to a Pakistani TV channel, ARY Gold.

"Our concern is our security. We have been saying that if there is no problem to our security, Pakistan and India can move to mutual reduction of forces and have no-war pact - this has been our stand," he said.

He was quoted as saying that

Pakistan Army could cut its size if the Kashmir issue was resolved.

Musharraf also dismissed reports that India and Pakistan agreed for a dialogue process due to pressure from international community. "No one can put pressure from outside but there can be some suggestion for this purpose."

Musharraf said the new peace move was initiated due to the prevailing impression in India and Pakistan that issues could be resolved through a dialogue.

Musharraf also declined to directly answer questions whether hardliners in BJP scuttled a settlement in Agra.

Expressing optimism about the new peace overtures, Musharraf said, "(Prime Minister Atal Bihari) Vajpayee may have thought that it will be the great achievement of his career if all the disputes between

India and Pakistan including the core issue of Kashmir are settled, which will lead to establishment of peace in the region".

He said the resolution of all the outstanding issues through peaceful and amicable negotiations would benefit Pakistan and India.

"I think it will be a great achievement for the leaders of the two countries," Musharraf said.

AP adds: Pakistan is ready to get rid of its nuclear arsenal if uneasy neighbour India also does, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said Monday.

"As far as Pakistan is concerned, if India is ready to denuclearise, we would be happy to denuclearise," Aziz Ahmed Khan said. "But it will have to be mutual."

Pakistan and India declared themselves nuclear powers after

detonating atomic devises in 1998. Neither arsenal is open to inspections and it's not known exactly what either Pakistan or India possesses.

Pakistan says it developed its nuclear arsenal in response to the perceived threat from India.

"Our position has been that we were forced into the situation because of Indian nuclear ambitions," he said.

The two South Asian neighbours have fought three wars since the end of British rule of the sub-continent in 1947.

Two of those wars have been over the disputed Kashmir region. the international community has been pressing the two neighbours to hold peace talks to end their relentless bickering fearing it could escalate into a nuclear confrontation.



PHOTO: AFP

A man kisses his daughter after he was released from a 10-day quarantine at a center in the eastern Chinese city of Nanjing on Monday. China reported nine new SARS deaths and 160 new cases on Monday, the health ministry said, taking the nationwide death toll to 206 and the total number of cases to 4,280.

Progress against SARS in HK, Canada; concern in China, Taiwan

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong and Canada on Monday appeared to be gaining the upper hand in the battle against SARS but the situation in China remained alarming and new scientific evidence emerged that the virus may be more resilient than previously believed.

There was also growing concern on Monday over the severity of the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Taiwan, where an eighth person died of the disease on Sunday and 14 new cases were reported.

Just eight new cases of SARS were reported in Hong Kong on Sunday, the 10th straight day the number of new cases has declined

and the first time it has fallen into single digits in over a month.

Health officials in the former British colony were clearly pleased with the drop but cautioned that it was too early to declare victory.

"We are very pleased with the development," said Hong Kong's director of health Margaret Chan. "We hope this trend will be sustainable. For this to happen we have to continue with our efforts."

"I'm loath to predict as to whether there will be a continuous downward trend. This is my hope and the hope of the rest of Hong Kong," she said.

Five more people died of SARS in Hong Kong on Sunday, bringing the total number of deaths from the

disease in the territory to 184.

Canada, meanwhile, reported just one new "probable" case of the disease on Sunday, bringing further hope that the outbreak in the country has been brought under control.

A World Health Organization (WHO) advisory against non-essential travel to the Canadian city of Toronto was lifted last week but WHO advisories on travel to Hong Kong, Beijing and China's Guangdong and Shanxi provinces remain in place.

In China, where 197 people have died of SARS and more than 4,000 cases have been reported, there were reports on Monday of further unrest related to the dis-

ease.

The Jianghuai Morning Post said more than 100 farmers, enraged that a SARS quarantine center would be set up in their community, attacked a government office in eastern China and beat up officials.

The riot occurred overnight Saturday as the farmers gathered outside a government office in Zhejiang province's Yuhuan county, the papers said.

After surrounding the office for several hours, dozens of farmers stormed inside, ransacking three rooms and beating up three officials, the papers said.

A local police official said there had been several arrests.



PHOTO: AFP

The leaders of Nepal's five main political parties (from L) Narayan Man Bijukachha President of Nepal Peasants and Workers' Party, Amikh Sherchan President of People's Front-Nepal, Madhav Kumar Nepal General Secretary of Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist, Girija Prasad Koirala and Bharat Bimal Vice President Nepal Goodwill Party raise their hands at a public rally to protest against the king in Kathmandu on Sunday. The protest against King Gyanendra, who sacked an elected prime minister, was organized by the five parties.

Quake topples houses in China

ANN, Beijing

An earthquake measuring 5.8 on the Richter scale has toppled houses in an area of north-west China devastated by an earthquake in February, local officials said.

The tremor struck at 11.44 pm (1544 GMT) on Sunday in Jiashi county in the predominantly Muslim Xinjiang region, seismological officials said.

The area was levelled by a powerful quake on Feb 24, leaving 268 people dead and 4,000 injured.

Around 20 residential houses collapsed in the neighbouring county of Yuepuhu, Mr Liu Zongjian, from China's State Seismological Bureau, told AFP.

50,000 attend anti-king rally in Nepal

ANN, Kathmandu

Around 50,000 people attended a rally Sunday against the king in Nepal's capital Kathmandu organized by the country's five main political parties, witnesses said.

Riot police were posted on most streets as organizers said they were expecting up to 300,000 people to join the demonstration at the Open Theatre in the city.

But witnesses said the turnout was much less, with an estimated 50,000 demonstrators protesting King Gyanendra's sacking of the elected prime minister on October 4. Gyanendra took power for a week before appointing a royalist interim government and also

indefinitely postponing a general election.

The rally was organised jointly by the Nepal Congress (NC), the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninists (NCP-UMIL), the Nepal Peasants and Workers' Party (NPWP), People's Front-Nepal (PF-N) and the Nepal Goodwill Party (NGP).

"We are launching a decisive movement to crush regressive forces and establish democracy in the country," NC President Girija Prasad Koirala told the rally.

"The Royal Palace is behind all political instability in the country and has always acted against the interests of democracy."

Kashmir blasts claim 1

AFP, Srinagar

One person was killed and 18 others, including a pro-India politician affiliated with Indian Kashmir's former ruling party, were injured Monday in two explosions triggered by suspected Muslim rebels, a police spokesman said.

The fatality occurred when a blast ripped through a bus station Monday morning in the town of Doda, 220 kilometers (137 miles) south of Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, police said.

Seventeen people were injured, three of them seriously, and were taken to the hospital.

"We are ascertaining what caused the explosion," the spokesman said, adding that the area had been cordoned off.

I won't hang up my uniform: Musharraf

PTI, Islamabad

Dismissing the Opposition's demand that he should quit as chief of the army, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said he would not give up his uniform unless institutional harmony among different power centres in the country was restored.

"I am providing the harmony among the institutions. I will not leave my uniform because if I take such a decision at this moment it will be detrimental to Pakistan's interest," he said in an interview to a Pakistani TV channel.

Admitting that one person should not hold the offices of

president and chief of army at the same time, he said he would quit his uniform as soon as institutional harmony had been ensured in the country.

He clarified that by institutional harmony, he meant understanding between different powers centres in the country, including, legislature, military and judiciary.

The announcement came a day ahead of the fourth round of talks between Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's government and the Opposition parties on the status of the controversial constitutional amendments promulgated by the military ruler ahead of the last year's polls.

SARS 'can be spread by touch'

BBC Online

New research into the deadly SARS virus suggests it might be able to be spread through contact with contaminated objects.

World Health Organization (WHO) scientists say they have found that the pneumonia-like virus is more resilient than first thought, being able to survive for four hours on surfaces and up to four days in human waste.

SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) can also live indefinitely in sub-zero temperatures and refuses to be killed off even when doused in a detergent commonly used to sterilise contami-

nated areas.

The research backs up the theory that leaking sewage pipes helped spread an outbreak in a Hong Kong apartment block, in which 300 people were infected.

Densely-populated Hong Kong has been badly hit by the virus.

Five new deaths and eight new cases were reported on Sunday, pushing the death toll there to 184.

In mainland China, the health ministry on Sunday reported seven new deaths and 163 new infections. It takes the death toll to 197.

SARS has killed nearly 450 people worldwide.

US now puts focus on stopping DPRK from nuke export

Pyongyang threatens to scuttle dialogue

AFP, New York

The United States is shifting the focus of its North Korea policy from preventing the production of nuclear material to blocking the export of such material, The New York Times reported Monday.

President George W. Bush discussed the new approach this weekend with John Howard during the Australian Prime Minister's visit to the US leader's ranch at Crawford, Texas, the report said, citing officials familiar with the talks.

"The president said the central worry is not what they've got, but where it goes," an unnamed administration official was quoted as saying.

"He's very pragmatic about it, and the reality is that we probably won't know the extent of what they are producing. So the whole focus is to keep the plutonium from going further."

The policy of preventing North Korea from going nuclear by any means necessary dates to 1994 when then-president Bill Clinton warned Pyongyang that producing plutonium could result in a US attack on its nuclear facilities.

Privately, however, US officials are saying that policy is no

longer sustainable, in part because of South Korea's opposition to military action on the Korean peninsula, the Times said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated Sunday that North Korea must scrap its nuclear program --- while admitting that the United States can't gauge its extent.

"Everybody has now made it clear to North Korea that they will not find any assistance coming to them from the region in terms of economic development unless they abandon their nuclear weapons program," Powell said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

Pyongyang told the United States last month that it has nuclear weapons and threatened to prove it with a "display."

But Washington has been unable to confirm Pyongyang's assertion that it has reprocessed spent nuclear fuel.

Meanwhile, North Korea threatened Monday to scuttle all nuclear talks unless the United States responds positively to the North's offer to dismantle its nuclear program in exchange for economic and diplomatic pay-offs.

'Vajpayee aiming for a place in history'

AFP, New Delhi

For 78-year-old Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, lasting peace with Pakistan is a personal quest which comes from the heart, driven by a zeal he hopes will ensure him a place in the sun, analysts said Monday.

When the poet turned prime minister stood in Kashmir on April 18 and offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan, he set in motion his third bid to mend fences with India's arch-rival.

A flurry of diplomatic activity has ensued and the two sides are on the verge of restoring full diplomatic and air links, while preparations are also underway for direct talks.

"After two experiences, the third round of talks will be decisive. At least in my lifetime, this will be the last," Vajpayee told parliament last week.

"How long shall India and Pakistan continue to fight? ... will this bloodbath going on for 50 years come to an end or not?" he asked.

"This is Mr Vajpayee's greatest virtue," wrote M.J. Akbar, editor of The Asian Age newspaper, in a column.

Vir Sanghvi, editor, The Hindustan Times, in a column termed Vajpayee "India's most admired politician" and an "incurable optimist" when it comes to Pakistan.

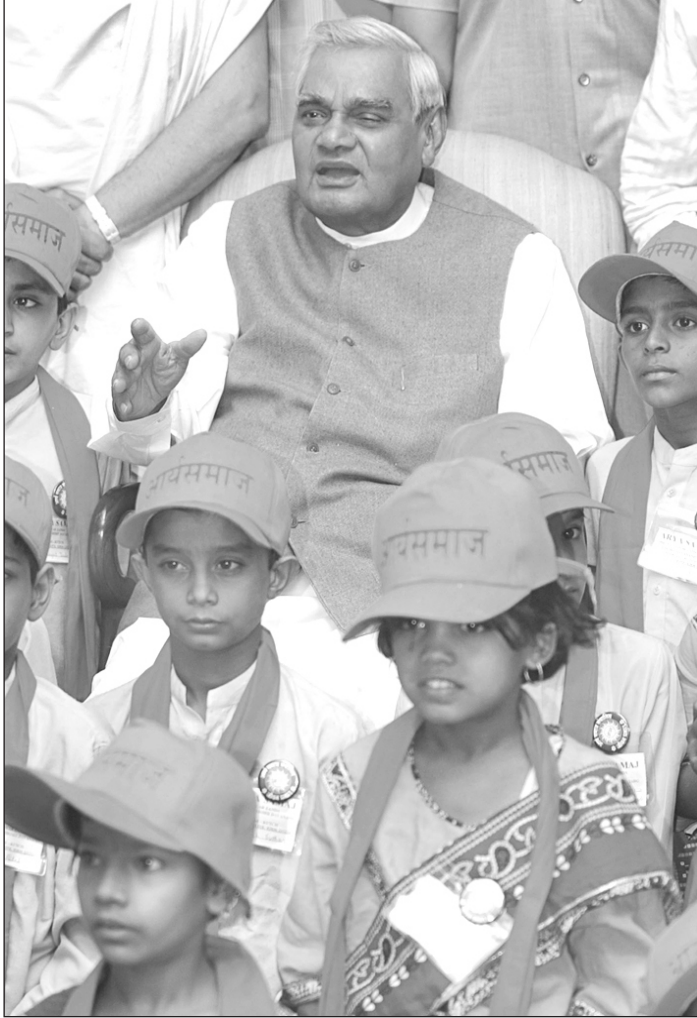


PHOTO: AFP

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee poses on Monday with children left orphaned by the Bhuj earthquake in New Delhi. Vajpayee donated a sum of 100,000 USD to Jewwan Prabhat, a non-governmental organization (NGO), caring for the orphans and widows of the quake.