



President of the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Council, Dr. Mahesh Yadav, uses blood to write a letter to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and to Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf in Bhopal on Tuesday following the latest peace moves by India and Pakistan. Peace overtures between the hostile neighbours in the past three weeks have spawned hopes of their first dialogue in almost two years and a normalisation of relations after a tense 17-month standoff.

Pak PM claims cross-party backing for talks with India

A lot still needs to be done to lower temperatures: Armitage

AFP, Islamabad

Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali claimed a mandate from all political parties to pursue "meaningful" dialogue with arch-rival India, after a cross-party meeting late Monday.

"All the leaders gave me a mandate to hold meaningful dialogue with India," Jamali said after consulting opposition Islamist and secular party leaders as well as government-allied parties.

Peace overtures between the hostile neighbours in the past three weeks have spawned hopes of their first dialogue in almost two years and a normalisation of relations.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee made a surprise offer on April 18 to agree to Pakistan's long-held call for talks. Jamali has since sent a formal invitation to Vajpayee to come to Pakistan for talks. Vajpayee has sent a "positive response" to the invitation, a foreign ministry spokesman said Monday.

The prime minister summoned all major political party leaders to his official residence late Monday to discuss a strategy for approaching possible dialogue. He has also raised the possibility of holding a special session of parliament to discuss the detente with India.

The South Asian giants have been locked in a dangerous standoff for 17 months since an attack on India's parliament which it blamed on Pakistan. They were close to war this time last year.

Meanwhile, there has been progress in India-Pakistan ties but a lot still needs to be done to lower temperatures between them, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said on the eve of a South Asia trip.

Armitage told BBC that all credit went to the leaders of the countries for recent moves to ease tensions which have kept the nuclear-ready subcontinent on a knife-edge for 17 months.

Pakistan's offer Monday to get rid of its nuclear arsenal if rival India agreed to do likewise was a "good gesture and that would be a great sign of enormous progress... but I think we have to keep our appetites under control."

"I think we have got a lot of work to do to continue to lower the temperatures for two great countries India and Pakistan to be able to live in peace and stability with each other."

He said Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf had been able to curb the infiltration of Muslim militants from Pakistan into the Indian side of disputed Kashmir as he had pledged last year, adding the United States regarded him as a man of his word.

"He has been able put pressure on to lower the cross-border violence, we expect he'll continue to do this..."

The issue is a key sticking point in relations between the neighbours.

Armitage said, "in the war against terrorism president Musharraf and his colleagues in Islamabad have been absolutely spectacular in breaking up terrorist cells, most recently one directed against our consul in Karachi, for which we are enormously grateful."

Asked if Musharraf had done enough to stop the operation of militant groups, he said: "As long as we have one person intent on doing harm to innocent civilians, then none of us are doing enough."

Armitage and Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca are due to arrive in Islamabad late Wednesday.

They are to meet top Pakistani leaders on Thursday, US and Pakistani officials said.

Armitage meets ISI chief in Washington

PTI, Islamabad

Ahead of his South Asia visit to discuss the fresh peace overtures by India and Pakistan, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage held a key meeting with ISI Chief Lt Gen Ehsanul Huq in Washington.

The meeting between Armitage and Gen Huq, who arrived in Washington on Sunday for a week-long visit, took place on Monday. US officials are seeking a full briefing on militancy in Kashmir before Armitage's mission to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

Although both the US and Pakistani officials refused to give any detail about his visit, Gen Huq's itinerary revealed the significance of his mission as he was scheduled to meet top American officials, local daily Dawn said.

Besides Armitage, the ISI chief met Secretary of State Colin Powell and Vice-President Dick Cheney, the paper said. Gen Huq is also scheduled to meet US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Security Chief Tom Ridge.

The paper also reported that Armitage flew from Washington to London to hold talks with Indian National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra. It did not provide details.

SARS hits 20-50 age group hardest

AFP, Beijing

Figures released by Beijing health authorities Tuesday showed the SARS virus showed no distinction between male and female but one was far more likely to succumb if aged between 20 and 50.

The first breakdown of cases in the capital as of Monday showed 73.33 percent, or 1,391, of the 1,897 infected were in the 20 to 50 age group.

Only 169 people, or 8.9 percent, under the age of 20 had been struck down and just 17.7 percent, or 337 people, over the age of 50 were infected.

The figures also showed as many men as women had caught the virus (955 men to 942 women).

The authorities also broke down the numbers into professions with 335 of the cases being medical workers, 229 officials and clerks and 198 retirees.

Cai Fuchao, director of the propaganda department of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China, said just eight pre-school children were affected.

Task of fighting SARS remains arduous

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

Despite marked progress in Beijing's effort to control the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus, the task ahead remains arduous and complicated, Premier Wen Jiabao said Monday while inspecting the capital's SARS prevention work.

He urged officials at various levels to make preparations both psychologically and practically, and be determined to win the battle against the deadly disease by strengthening prevention work.

While visiting Xiaotangshan hospital, Wen highlighted the reliance on science and called for solidarity between the army and citizens during the ongoing battle.

The hospital, in the town of Xiaotangshan in the northern outskirts of Beijing, is part of the massive effort to fight SARS.

The second phase of the hospital's construction was finished in seven days by more than 7,000

people working around clock. It was home to 324 SARS patients by Monday.

Wen said medical workers should protect themselves from the disease and spare no effort during their shifts.

Wen has also visited the village in the Xiaotangshan Town and discussed with local farmers on how to prevent and treat SARS.

Monday, he urged officials at all levels to be fully aware of the extreme importance of SARS control and to treat it as a priority.

Any breach of duty and malpractice will be harshly punished.

Wen said no SARS cases should be missed and it was important to prevent further infections at the hospital.

He said treatment for severe SARS patients should be enhanced and the country's top hospitals should be leading the fight against the virus, specifically treating infected patients.

Meanwhile, workers are toiling 24-hours a day to transform the Chinese-Japan Friendship Hospital, a former comprehensive hospital, into a hospital specializing in infectious diseases.

The biggest part of the plan is the addition of two more intensive care unit floors with about 40 beds each, which are being added to the original single floor.

The Beijing municipal government plans to centralize the treatment of serious SARS patients in the capital to the hospital.

The units require special medical equipment, such as electrocardiogram monitors and respirators.

Chen Ling, a senior engineer at the hospital, said it had already ordered about 400 respirators, 50 electric suction apparatus and 50 electrocardiogram monitors.

"We don't know when the equipment will arrive," Chen said.

"But as long as the equipment is here, we will work to set it up."



PHOTO: AFP

A man walks past a news headline on a newsstand wearing mask to protect against SARS on a street in Hong Kong on Tuesday. Six more people have died on Tuesday from the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus with nine more cases being recorded health officials said.

No relapses seen among recovered patients

AFP, Hong Kong

None of the 1,400-plus recovered SARS patients in China has suffered a relapse, state press reported Tuesday.

"To date, we have not received any reports of relapses among recovered patients," Yang Weizhong, from the Chinese Center for Disease Prevention and Control, was quoted as saying by the Xinhua news agency.

On Sunday, Hong Kong health authorities said a number of patients who were believed to have recovered from the deadly SARS virus and subsequently discharged had been readmitted to hospital.

However, Senior Executive Manager of the Hospital Authority, Dr Liu Shao-haei, said most of the patients had been readmitted to hospital due to other illnesses "not related to SARS and had not suffered relapses".



PHOTO: AFP

Mohammad Irshad (L) is hugged by his father at the Overseas Pakistani Foundation office in Karachi on Tuesday upon his return from the UAE where he and other children work in camel races, while his brother (R) looks on. Six more children were deported by UAE authorities, part of a smuggling operation for camel racing, a practice still thrives despite checks by Pakistani authorities. Fifteen children returned from the Gulf last week.

Lanka seeks road map for peace with Tigers

Both sides need to be flexible: PM

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Tuesday called for a "road map" for ending the island's drawn-out ethnic conflict amid stepped-up international diplomacy to revive stalled talks with Tamil Tiger rebels.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told parliament Tuesday that even though the talks with Tamil Tiger guerrillas were at an impasse, his government wanted to develop a plan to encompass the thorny issues of power-sharing.

"We will in consultation with all parties proceed to develop a road map towards this objective," he told parliament Tuesday, the first session of the assembly since Tiger rebels suspended peace talks on April 21.

"This (road map) will set out with clarity the sequence in which the substantive issues will be

addressed in the unfolding process, so that the objective sought to be accomplished and the means by which this goal will be reached, becomes apparent."

He said efforts were under way to bring the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) back to the negotiating table. The Tigers suspended talks to protest alleged government failure to deliver on "critical issues."

"The international community whose goodwill is abundantly at our disposal is engaged in a professional exercise of shuttle diplomacy which has already begun to show promising results," Wickremesinghe said.

He did not indicate when the talks could resume, but said the negotiations so far limited to the government and the LTTE should be expanded to include Sri Lanka's second largest minority, Muslims.

Clashes between Tamils, who

are the largest minority, and Muslims in the island's east had on several occasions threatened to undermine the Norwegian-brokered truce that has been in place since February 23 last year.

Reuters adds: Sri Lanka's prime minister acknowledged hardships on Tuesday in the island's peace process but said both the government and separatist Tamil Tigers had to be flexible to get direct talks moving again.

Speaking to parliament, Ranil Wickremesinghe said the peace process he started when he was elected in late 2001 had not been permanently stopped when the Tigers suspended talks last month saying not enough was being done to rebuild war-hit Tamil areas.

"The government is open to having wide-ranging discussions on the many issues that are represented here -- especially regarding the extent of devolution of power," he said.

Manila aborts talks with Moro rebels

AFP, Manila

President Gloria Arroyo on Tuesday called off talks in Malaysia to resolve a Moro separatist rebellion in the southern Philippines, giving the military free rein to punish "terrorism" committed by Moro rebels.

Arroyo aborted the May 9-11 Kuala Lumpur meeting which were to pave the way for talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) after recent attacks on Mindanao island that have left 83 dead and hundreds wounded since March.

"We shall not stand for terrorism in the guise of a fight for freedom. We shall pursue peace only under the rule of law and constitutional order," she said in a statement.

Government negotiators would "inform the Malaysian government of our wish to postpone the exploratory talks in Kuala Lumpur until we can establish more auspicious circumstances to move the peace

process forward."

She added: "We shall deploy all the lawful instruments of the state to end this conflict and bring peace to the homes of our people."

Manila is meanwhile "looking into the possibility whether the MILF should be declared as a terrorist group," military vice chief of staff Lieutenant General Rodolfo Garcia told reporters.

The government on Monday offered a near million-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of MILF chief Hashim Salamat and four other rebel leaders, a day after the MILF raided the Mindanao mining town of Siocon.

Twenty-eight people, mostly civilians, were killed and dozens injured in the Siocon raid by members of 12,500-strong MILF, waging a 25-year campaign to set up an Islamic state in the southern third of the mainly Roman Catholic Philippine islands.

Suu Kyi marks one year of freedom

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi marked one year of freedom from house arrest on Tuesday with a trip outside Yangon but still frustrated that her calls for democracy appear to be falling on deaf ears. The military government had raised expectations of talks on political change when it freed the 57-year-old Nobel laureate last year, allowing her to travel freely throughout the country. But the junta has not responded to Suu Kyi's calls for dialogue.

Suu Kyi, who traveled to the northwestern Kachin State on Tuesday for a month-long visit, her longest trip since her release, said of the military two weeks ago: "They don't want change, but change is inevitable."