

UN halts Afghan missions

AFP, Kabul

The United Nations has suspended missions in southern Afghanistan following "brutal" attacks on deminers which left one dead and three wounded in the past week, a UN spokesman said Thursday.

It has also imposed a dusk-to-dawn ban on UN road missions anywhere in the country, Manoel de Almeida e Silva told reporters at a press conference.

Gunmen in Zabul province Monday ambushed a three-vehicle convoy, which included an ambulance, of deminers from Afghan Technical Consultants. On failing to find any foreigners, they opened fire, wounding two deminers.

"In what appears to be a deliberate and premeditated attack, six assailants ambushed the convoy and stopped the last vehicle looking for international personnel," de Almeida e Silva said.

"They opened fire when they were told there were no expatriates in the group."

UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi "was appalled at the brutal assault on three deminers."

People who targeted "these heroic deminers" were "enemies of the entire Afghan nation," Brahimi said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage (foreground, 3rd,R), holds a meeting with his Pakistani counterpart, Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar (background, 2nd,R) at the foreign ministry in Islamabad on Thursday. Pakistani leaders began meetings with the top US officials after saying they were ready for a "meaningful" dialogue with nuclear rival India.

Pakistan to maintain its minimum N-deterrence

Pak MPs in India as peace moves peak

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan will maintain its nuclear arms policy of "minimum deterrence" without indulging in an arms race, the military declared Thursday, in the wake of official pledges to give up its nuclear weapons if India follows suit.

A military statement, issued after a meeting Wednesday of top brass overseeing Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, comes amid a diplomatic detente with India after a 17-month standoff.

Pakistan says "minimum deterrence," whereby it maintains a large-enough nuclear arsenal to deter arch-rival India from using nuclear weapons against it, is the "cornerstone" of its national security policy.

The National Command Authority (NCA), chaired by President Pervez Musharraf met "to review progress of the country's strategic program," the statement said, a reference to its nuclear program.

The NCA "reiterated that while retention of minimum deterrence was the cornerstone of Pakistan's national security policy, Pakistan did not believe in an arms race," it stated.

Pakistan came out of the nuclear closet in May 1998 when it conducted a series of nuclear test explosions, within days of similar tests by its arch-rival India. It is estimated to possess 30 to 50 nuclear warheads.

Musharraf and foreign ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan both said this week that Pakistan would get rid of its nuclear arsenal if India followed, and if the 55-year old territorial dispute over Kashmir was resolved.

"If the Kashmir dispute is resolved and there is peace and security in the region, South Asia could be de-nuclearized, mutually by India and Pakistan," Musharraf said in a television interview Sunday.

Khan said Monday Pakistan

"would be very happy to de-nuclearise" if India did the same.

The NCA approved a number of proposals put forward by NCA secretariat and its strategic plans division at Wednesday's meet, but the statement gave no details.

Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali and Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri also attended the meeting.

Pakistan moved a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly in November 1995 calling for the establishment of a nuclear weapons free zone in South Asia.

Meanwhile, thirteen Pakistani MPs arrived in India Thursday for a week-long unofficial visit expected to include meetings at the parliament in New Delhi amid peace moves between the neighbouring nuclear rivals.

Television channels showed the group crossing into India on foot through the Wagah border point in the northern Indian state of

Punjab, the only legal land crossing between the two countries.

They were garlanded by local officials after stepping onto Indian territory.

The visit follows recent peace overtures between the countries, which have been locked in a dangerous stand-off for 17 months.

In the past few days both the Indian and Pakistani governments have announced the resumption of diplomatic and air links, severed in December 2001 after a deadly attack on India's parliament which New Delhi blamed on gunmen backed by Islamabad.

The attack triggered the mobilisation of one million troops to their common border and brought them to the brink of war until last October.

Reports said the MPs would be given a formal welcome by officials in the nearby city of Amritsar, where they are expected to visit the Golden Temple -- the most important shrine of the Sikh religion.

'SAARC summit soon'

IANs, Kathmandu

The seven-nation SAARC summit that was to be held in Islamabad in January but was postponed indefinitely will be rescheduled to take place soon, a top Pakistani diplomat has said.

Zamir Akram, Pakistan's ambassador here, said Islamabad was going to send its suggestion to Nepal, which is the chair, and to the SAARC secretariat here to discuss the dates with member nations before announcing the schedule.

The diplomat said the meet would be held this year, possibly after July.

Regarding the peace moves being made anew by New Delhi and Islamabad, he said "the right noises were being made".

"We've gone to war three times," he said, referring to India and Pakistan. "Much blood has been shed."

Akram admitted that Pakistan had spent a "vast amount of resources" on defence when the money would have been better employed to improve human welfare.

To break this "vicious cycle", both the countries needed to rise above their "age-old hardened positions", he said.

The bad blood between the two neighbours was no longer just a bilateral issue but a matter of concern in South Asia and even the whole world because both had nuclear powers, he pointed out.

"It takes a missile three minutes to travel either way," he said.

Nepali king working to end 'summer of discontent'

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra has said he is working to prevent a "summer of discontent" as political parties Thursday launched a movement against the monarchy.

Five political parties, who are protesting against the king's sacking of the elected prime minister in October, said they were beginning a campaign of street protests.

Around 1,000 party activists gathered in Kathmandu to pay tribute to those who died in the 1990 struggle to introduce constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy.

Norway moves to end Lankan deadlock

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's antagonists vowed they will not return to war as Norwegian diplomats Thursday opened fresh talks with Tamil Tiger rebels to end the deadlock in the island's peace process.

Government chief negotiator G. L. Peiris said the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had given an assurance that they will not return to war despite the breakdown in negotiations.

Peiris said the Japanese peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, who held separate talks with Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran Wednesday, conveyed to the government that there will be no slipping back to fighting.

"It was clear both from the tone and tenure of the discussion with Mr Akashi that there will be no return to violence," Peiris said.

"Efforts are on for a resumption of talks and what is clearly ruled out is a resumption of war. That is out of the question."

Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim was to hold talks with the top negotiator of the LTTE, Anton Balasingham, in a bid to jump-start the Norwegian-backed peace bid, government officials said.

Solheim is a key figure who raised Sri Lanka's peace hopes in November 2000 by announcing that the guerrillas were serious about peace talks following a meeting he held with Tiger supremo Prabhakaran.

Pak PM under Islamists' pressure on Kashmir

AFP, Islamabad

Islamic parties, the strongest voice in Pakistan's opposition, are applying intense pressure on the government to not yield on Kashmir, the core source of tension with India, in its bid to make peace and hold talks with its rival.

"We must not deviate from our principled stand," Liaquat Baloch, from the six-party religious right alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), declared at a press conference Wednesday.

"Whatever amendments are needed to sustain the dialogue should be in line with our stance on the dispute."

"We must come out with an aggressive and pro-active policy to take the initiative on this issue. Whatever is to be done should be linked to the resolution of Kashmir."

The Muslim-majority Himalayan region is claimed by both the neighbours and split between them, and is the source of 55 years of territorial tensions and two wars in 1948 and 1965.

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali has won the backing of Islamists for his bid for dialogue with India -- but on condition that he does not budge from Pakistan's demand that a plebiscite be conducted in Kashmir for its people to decide on rule by either Pakistan or India.

United Nations Security Council resolutions as early as 1948 call for such a plebiscite.

Since Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee agreed on April 18 to work towards talks with Pakistan, both leaders have pledged to resume transport and full diplomatic ties and Jamali has formally invited Vajpayee for talks.

SARS situation 'still grim'

Beijing punishes 120 officials

AP, Beijing

Warning that its SARS situation was "still grim," China announced measures aimed at repairing mounting economic damage and helping airlines, tourism and other battered industries, state media reported Thursday.

The news came as World Health Organisation investigators travelled to a northern Chinese province to study how to stop SARS from spreading in the poor countryside. A major outbreak in densely populated farming areas would be a catastrophe because rural hospitals are ill-equipped to deal with the epidemic.

The new economic measures, issued during a Cabinet meeting led by Premier Wen Jiabao on Wednesday, appeared in a report by the official Xinhua News Agency on the front pages of the Communist Party newspaper People's Daily and other major papers.

"The current SARS situation is still grim, and the economic impact is more pronounced each day," the Xinhua dispatch said.

The report said the Cabinet ordered businesses in SARS-affected areas not to lay off employees and to do as much as possible to stabilise employment conditions.

The disease has killed at least 219 people on China's mainland and sickened more than 4,500, according to the Health Ministry.

Also Thursday, Xinhua said mainland Chinese authorities had shipped 88,000 anti-infection suits to hard-hit Hong Kong for use by hospital workers. It said the suits arrived Wednesday and 95,000 more would be sent on Saturday.

Reuters adds: China has punished more than 120 officials in the past month for covering up the extent of the SARS outbreak or failing to prevent the spread of the flu-like virus, the Web site of Xinhua news agency said on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP

Hospital nurses comfort a woman in G.B hospital in Agartala on Wednesday after she was injured during a militant attack. Ten people were shot dead and three were seriously injured when armed militants belonging to the outlawed All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) attacked Mohorcherra village, 55 km east of Tripura's capital Agartala.



PHOTO: AFP

A worker sprays disinfectant to prevent against the killer SARS virus in a subway train in Shanghai on Thursday. SARS is expected to hammer China's exports, raising the nation's trade deficit to between two to three billion dollars this year if the viral disease is not brought under control in the next three months, state press reported.