

Pakistan hopes Armitage will coax India to talks

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan expects top US envoy Richard Armitage to coax India into making good on its offer of talks when he visits New Delhi, after expressing "cautious optimism" that a nascent process of dialogue was emerging between the rivals, analysts said Friday.

Kicking off his latest South Asian peace bid in Islamabad Thursday, Armitage said he was encouraged by a surprise diplomatic thaw, triggered by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's April 18 consent to Pakistan's long-held call for talks.

The Deputy Secretary of State directed credit to Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterparts, insisting the United States had played no role and would play no other role than "facilitator" of dialogue.

Armitage's offer to help break an official silence of almost two years is music to Pakistan's ears, which has sought to get India to talk for months, and sought international attention to their 55-year-old dispute over Kashmir.

The last formal talks were in July 2001 at Agra, India.

"The United States' playing a behind-the-scenes role in this regard is greatly appreciated," a senior foreign ministry official told AFP.

"Their (Indian) coercive diplomacy has failed and now they have to come and start the normal way of conducting the inter-state business," he said, requesting anonymity.

"We hope the dialogue process between Pakistan and India will soon get underway."

Armitage is due in New Delhi later Friday after a stopoff in Afghanistan. He will meet Indian leaders on Saturday.

"This present peace mission by Armitage will definitely facilitate the initiation of dialogue," political analyst Doctor Hasan Askari told AFP.

"It is a kind of an American push to Pakistan-India dialogue. The Americans would always communicate to India that Pakistan is really sincere and willing to open a meaningful dialogue on all contentious issues."

Former foreign secretary Tanvir Ahmed expected Armitage to reassure India of Pakistan's commitment to stop the passage from Pakistan of Muslim militants waging a 14-year-old insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir.

"Armitage will try to reassure the Indians that he has reminded Pakistan of its commitment to prevent Line of Control (LoC) infiltration," Ahmed told AFP, referring to the de-facto border which divides the Pakistani- and Indian-controlled zones of Kashmir.

"This is an excellent opportunity to encourage dialogue."

The divided Muslim majority Himalayan state of Kashmir has caused two wars between the South Asian giants and brought them to the brink of conflict several times.

Ahmed believed Armitage will persuade New Delhi by saying that Pakistan wants dialogue on Kashmir, but will not hold trade and other issues hostage to progress on the vexatious issue.



Samajwadi Party President Mulayam Singh (4th from R) poses with a Pakistani parliamentary delegation in New Delhi on Friday. Thirteen Pakistani MPs arrived in India by road on a week-long unofficial peace mission that is expected to include high-level meetings with Indian leaders.

India test fires Astra missile

AP, New Delhi

India test fired its new Astra air-to-air missile from a ground launcher on Friday, according to local press reports.

Sources at the Defense Ministry said another test was scheduled within the next two days, according to the Press Trust of India.

India has said it has a fixed schedule of missile tests for its growing weaponry and routinely denies they are connected to other events, although often India and Pakistan conduct weapons tests a day apart.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they became independent nations in 1947. International diplomacy averted another war last year.

On Thursday, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said he would not accept Pakistan's offer for mutual destruction of nuclear arsenals.

Pakistan wants neutral expert to resolve water row with India

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has formally notified India that it is seeking a neutral expert to settle a long-running row over India's construction of a dam on one of the key rivers feeding Pakistan's farmlands.

"A notice has been sent to India for the appointment of a neutral expert," Water and Power Resources Minister Aftab Ahmad Sherpao told AFP.

Pakistan fears the Baglihar Hydroelectric Plant, under construction on the west-flowing Chenab river in the Indian-controlled zone of disputed Kashmir, could deprive its drought-stricken plains of over 7,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second) of water per day and devastate its agriculture.

2nd round of govt, Maoist talks open in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoist rebels sat down for their second round of peace talks Friday, with the rebels hopeful that the meeting would bring results.

Teams from both sides went into a closed-door meeting at a hotel in Kathmandu where talks are expected to focus on ways to build trust after seven years of war.

"I am hopeful of positive results," Maoist negotiator Krishna Bahadur Mahara said, before he went inside.

The first round of talks was held on April 27 and both sides said after the five-hour meeting that they were satisfied, but gave little away about the detail of their discussions.

North Korea admits having 2 nukes

AFP, Tokyo

North Korean negotiator Li Gun admitted during three-way talks with China and the United States in Beijing last month that Pyongyang possessed two nuclear bombs, a Japanese newspaper reported Friday, quoting unnamed US sources.

"We already possess two nuclear bombs," Li was quoted by the Sanket Shimbus as telling US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly on April 23, the first day of the three-day talks.



Leila, 9, collects drinking water from a leaking pipe across a canal in the southern Iraqi city of Basra on Thursday. Iraqi health officials held meeting with the UN's World Health Organisation and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Basra on Thursday to discuss a possible cholera epidemic in southern Iraq.

NATO expansion illustrates US geostrategy for Europe

AFP, Washington

Ratified by the US Senate and hailed by President George W. Bush, NATO's expansion to seven central and east European nations shows how US geostrategy for Europe has refocused on former Soviet Union satellite states.

The war against Iraq and the tensions it produced in US relations with France, Germany and Russia accelerated the move to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a measure extolled by Bush.

In comments that ruffled feathers, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld earlier this year called countries opposing the US-led war on Iraq "old Europe," contrasting them to the newer European democracies which supported the invasion.

Most of those new democracies rallied to the US side in the conflict, even though many were in the process of becoming full fledged members of the European Union.

Their side-taking upset French President Jacques Chirac who declared on February 17 that the former countries of communist Europe had behaved irresponsibly and "should have kept quiet."

Chirac's displeasure was pro-

voiced when leaders of 10 eastern European countries, the so-called Vilnius group, all of them NATO pretenders, signed a widely circulated letter backing the US position on Iraq.

Welcoming to the White House on Thursday foreign ministers from seven new NATO member states -- Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia -- Bush said: "America has always considered them friends, and we will always be proud to call them allies."

"In the battle of Iraq, central and eastern European countries have stood with America and our coalition to end a grave threat to peace, and to rid Iraq of a brutal, brutal regime."

"The peoples of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia have a fresh memory of tyranny," Bush continued. "And they know the consequences of complacency in the face of danger."

To hammer the message home, Bush received the seven foreign officials in the same White House room where president Harry Truman on May 8, 1945, announced the end of World War II in Europe.

The US Senate on Thursday unanimously ratified the accords

admitting seven new members in NATO. Bush called on other member nations to "quickly" do the same. "I urge all the current members of NATO to welcome these new members as quickly as possible," he said.

While their economic and military might is not so great, the new members' geographic situation at the heart of Europe reinforces US analysts who favor a repositioning of US forces stationed in Europe.

Several bases in Germany, for instance, could be moved further east. Bulgaria has already indicated willingness to offer four or five military bases to NATO that could be used by the United States.

With that, NATO forces would be brought closer to the Middle East and the Caucasus, a platform that only Turkey among the 19 current NATO members was so far able to make available.

Negotiations between Washington and Ankara over the use of Turkish bases in the war on Iraq were arduous and failed to garner the result desired by the United States.

And given UN opposition to the US-led war against Iraq, the Bush administration would like to see a NATO contribution to a stabilization force in Iraq.

US asks Iranian group in Iraq to disarm or face fire

AP, Baghdad

The US military issued an ultimatum Friday to an armed Iranian opposition group operating in Iraq, insisting that it lay down its arms or face attack. Meanwhile, US officials said they had located the main vaults of the nation's central bank -- and found they were apparently not looted.

Military officers at the US Army's V Corps in Baghdad said the Mujahedeen Khalq, a longtime Iranian opposition group that operated in Iraq with Saddam Hussein's blessing, had been surrounded by US forces northeast of the capital. The officers spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Mujahedeen Khalq, or People's Warriors, has several camps near Baqubah, 45 miles from Baghdad. US troops were prepared for full-scale combat but were negotiating with members of the group Friday, the officials said.

'No room for Saddam's men in Iraqi politics'

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi opposition leaders laying out plans for a new democratic government are insisting that officials from Saddam Hussein's Baath party be banned from political life.

While the United States is working with Baathists to restore the nation's infrastructure, Iraqi leaders who met with US officials here late Thursday said they must play no role in the future government.

"We agreed to cooperate on security as well as intelligence about the Baathists to eradicate the remains of Saddam's partisans," said Ahmad Chalabi, one of five leaders who met with Jay Garner, the top US civilian now in Iraq.

The Council of Five has been appointed by the United States to take the lead role in preparing for a

historic national conference in the next few weeks to create an Iraqi government. Garner made no mention of any agreement.

It was all but impossible under Saddam's regime to hold a position of importance without being a party member, making it a time-consuming task for the US-led coalition to root out hardliners who still support him.

"The leaders of Baath sections and branches will not be allowed any political activity," said Hoshiyar Zibari, an official with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), after Thursday's talks.

The KDP and Jalal Talabani's rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Chalabi's US-backed Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi National Accord of Iyad Allawi and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, deputy head

of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, make up the council.

The new US advisor to Iraq's justice ministry, Clint Williamson, said Thursday a special Iraqi tribunal could try top members of the former regime for crimes against the Iraqi people.

But as the United States tries to speed up the massive task of rebuilding the battered nation's basic services, it is working hand-in-hand with many former party members even before their backgrounds have been verified.

US officials say that involvement with banned weapons programmes, terrorism or human rights violations would be the criteria for disqualification from their former jobs.



Palestinian youth hurl stones at an Israeli tank during clashes in the center of Balata refugee camp in the West Bank town of Nablus on Thursday. The Palestinians have warned that the international roadmap for peace would not survive if US Secretary of State Colin Powell's upcoming visit fails to ensure its immediate implementation.

Maldives seeks global help for its existence

AFP, Colombo

Visiting Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom Friday called for global efforts to battle the rising seas that threaten to engulf his tiny atoll nation.

Gayoom, 64, said he discussed environmental issues with Sri Lankan leaders and stressed that global warming was not a problem confined to low-lying nations.

"Ecological degradation is of great concern to Sri Lanka and the Maldives," Gayoom told reporters at the end of his four-day official visit here.

"The consequences of this are not felt only in low-lying areas, but also in the US and other developed countries."

Maldives, a nation of 1,192 tiny coral island's scattered some 800 kilometers (500 miles) across the equator, is believed to be one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of global warming which is leading to rising sea levels.

SARS declining in Beijing as hospitals meet demand

AFP, Beijing

The SARS epidemic in Beijing is showing signs of declining with hospitals designated to treat patients now meeting demands, government officials said Friday.

"Overall, we can say that the upward tendency of SARS cases has been effectively checked in Beijing, and the epidemic has showed a sign of declining," Liang Wannian, vice-director of the Beijing Health Bureau said at a press conference.

Liang, an epidemiologist, pointed to the number of SARS patients diagnosed and admitted to hospital decreasing to between 30 and 40 per day over the past week from an average 70 to 80 between April 21 and May 2.

His upbeat assessment contradicted warnings by the World Health Organisation that it was too early to say the crisis had peaked in the Chinese capital.

"Some of the figures recently

have been encouraging, but until a proper epidemiological study can be done we can't conclude that it is really declining," WHO spokeswoman Mangal Balasegaram told AFP.

"We are still not getting a lot of adequate new data from China but it is getting better."

"We are still working on an epidemiological analysis and they (WHO experts) are noticing some things but they don't want to say anything about this right now."

"We really need to be cautious about analyzing the data too quickly. The data needs to be studied in detail."

Another government official however backed Liang's claim, saying he believed Beijing had turned the corner in the battle against the killer virus.

Sixteen hospitals have been designated for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome patients and the shortage of beds was now "greatly alleviated," said Han

Demin, deputy director of the Beijing Health Administration.

"This will play a major role in curbing the spread of SARS, reducing cross infection and the mortality rate of SARS patients, and alleviating the pressure on district and county hospitals," he said.

"This is also a turning point for Beijing to win the battle against SARS."

Han said 2,300 ward beds were already in use, and an additional 1,200 beds will be put into use in the near future, the Xinhua news agency reported.

The government will designate more hospitals to handle SARS patients if necessary, Han added.

Beijing, the worst hit city in the world, has reported 2,136 confirmed SARS patients and another 1,486 suspected cases. Only 152 people have so far been discharged from hospital upon recovery.

More than 18,000 people are also under quarantine.



Two-year old boy Ngo Hoang Canh who is suspected of being infected with the deadly enterovirus 71 (EV71) is given intensive care at Ho Chi Minh-City's Paediatric Hospital Number 1 on Friday. Vietnam's health ministry said it was conducting an investigation into the deaths of 21 children suspected of being infected with the virus. The first suspected infection was reported on January 28 at this hospital.