

US shooting suspect a former Indian cadet

AFP, New Delhi

The gunman who allegedly went on a rampage at a US business school, killing one student and wounding two others, had trained with the Indian army, opposed US policy in Iraq and wanted "to solve mankind's problems."

Biswanath Halder, who earned a masters degree in business administration in 1999 at Case Western Reserve University, was identified by police as the culprit of Friday's shootout at the Cleveland school.

He allegedly stormed the building with two pistols, wearing a wig, bulletproof vest and a World War II-style helmet, according to police.

But before the 63-year-old shot to world notoriety, he had a prolific career on the Internet, voicing his opinion on everything from US sanctions on Saddam Hussein's Iraq and US Senate legislation on immigration to CNN's alleged "bias" toward India's arch-enemy Pakistan.

Armitage calls for peace in S Asia at end of his trip

AFP, New Delhi

A visit by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to South Asia has stepped up the thaw in tensions between India and Pakistan, but the envoy was careful to absolve Washington of blame if the process breaks down over Kashmir.

Armitage left India late Saturday after talks in New Delhi and Islamabad, but was keen not to be seen as a mediator and publicly offered no US assessment of the existence of any rebel training camps in the Pakistani-administered section of Kashmir.

Instead, Armitage praised peace moves initiated by the two nuclear-capable rivals in the past fortnight, which included an announced resumption of diplomatic ties and airlinks.

Before his departure for Washington, Armitage praised "the act of statesmanship" shown by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in offering talks to

Pakistan on April 18, after 17 months of crisis.

"I am cautiously optimistic that the process begun by the act of statesmanship by the prime minister of India could possibly lead to a step by step process that would eventually resolve all issues," he told reporters.

Armitage said he had relayed to Indian leaders remarks two days earlier by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf denying the existence of any rebel training camps in the Pakistani-administered section of Kashmir.

If there were any, "they will be gone tomorrow," Armitage quoted Musharraf as saying.

But he added: "It is not my job to give assurances. It is up to India to make up her own mind about that particular statement from President Musharraf."

According to analysts, the statement marked a departure from what the US envoy had to say a year ago.

Armitage, who was then spearheading an international diplomatic offensive, had secured a pledge from Musharraf to permanently end infiltration, which cooled tensions and brought India and Pakistan back from the brink of a feared nuclear war.

"Armitage's statement about no assurances is a very nuanced one," said Uday Bhaskar, deputy director of the New Delhi-based military think tank, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

Armitage, he said, was careful to make sure Washington would not take the blame in case violence in Kashmir increased or infiltration across the de facto border rose.

Kalim Bahadur, a professor from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, agreed.

"It is saying that terrorism in Kashmir is India's business while putting pressure on Pakistan by saying that India was at liberty to believe or disbelieve Musharraf's promises," he added.

This fit in well with New Delhi's

point of view that it would "judge Pakistan by what they do and not by what they say," as a foreign ministry spokesman put it.

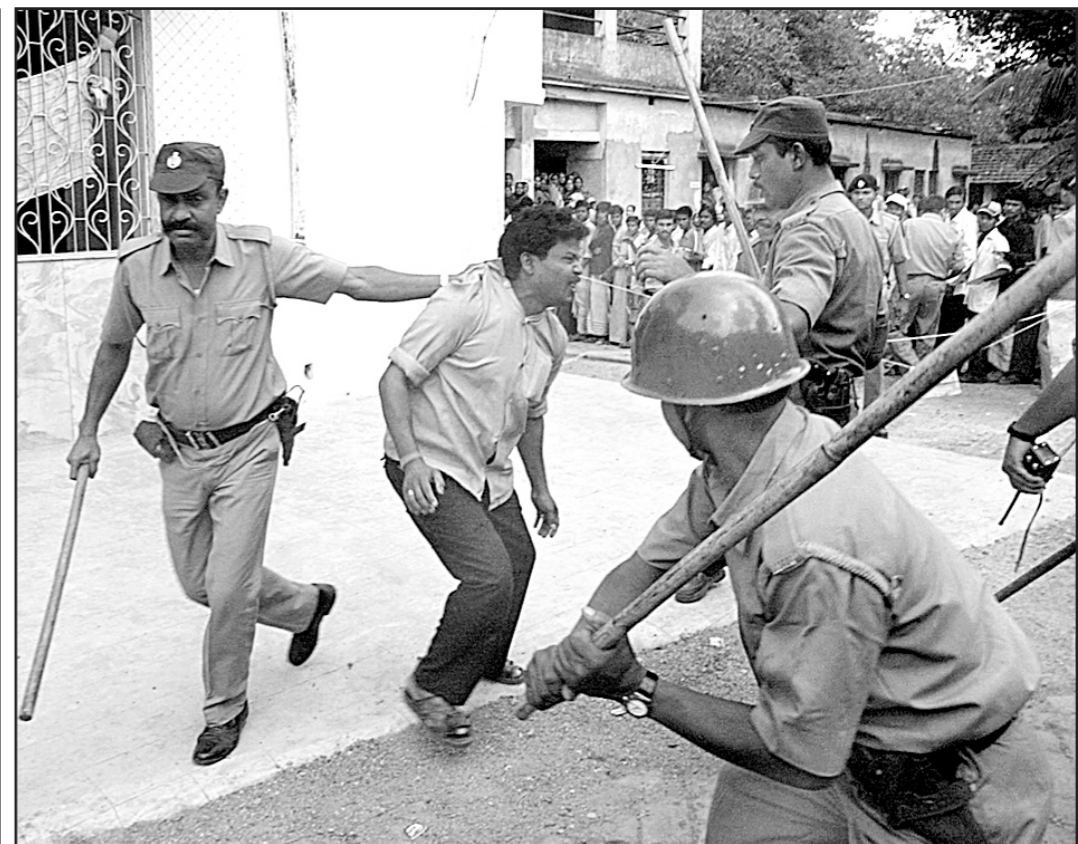
Sources said New Delhi had conveyed to Armitage that India would begin a dialogue only after it was convinced infiltration had lessened.

Armitage was firm in his opposition to violence in Kashmir, describing the killings in the province as terrorism and demanding it end.

Bhaskar said Washington was genuinely concerned that Kashmir could trigger a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan.

But, he added, the United States would still urge India to act with restraint should there be an increase in violence in Kashmir.

"The US has been and will be putting pressure on Musharraf. But the question is whether it will be up to the level India wants," Bhaskar said.



Indian police charge with batons on a suspected false voter during the 'Panchayat' (rural administration) election at a village in Howrah district, 35km west of Kolkata on Sunday. The West Bengal Panchayat polls has passed largely peaceful, except for some sporadic violence, which claims lives of 14 people.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

An Acehese child stands at a refugee camp at Blang Bladeh village in Bireun, about 198 km east of Banda Aceh on Saturday as thousands of refugees flee their homes following clashes between the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) separatist rebels. International mediators made last minute efforts on Saturday to bring Indonesia and separatist Aceh rebels together to avert a government military offensive.

Lankan political crisis deals double blow to peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's troubled peace bid could suffer another blow from the deepening political crisis between the cohabitation government and a hostile president, officials and analysts said Sunday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have been in a tense stand-off since Friday over Kumaratunga taking over the Development Lotteries Board run by the Economic Reforms ministry.

The premier warned the president publicly Saturday to back off

amid mounting concern among Colombo-based diplomats that the political crisis could impact on Norway's efforts to broker peace in the embattled island.

Wickremesinghe, in his first public speech since the stand-off began unfolding on Friday, said that Kumaratunga must change her mind or the country would plunge into a deeper crisis.

He said the erosion of authority from his government could encourage the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who suspended peace talks on April 21, to shun peace negotiations.

"The LTTE might say the government cannot do this (negotiate for peace). Its powers are taken away from time to time," Wickremesinghe said. "If that happens, the peace process will be weakened. On the other hand, the government will be weakened."

Politicians from minority Tamil parties expressed concern over the latest cohabitation crisis and said the confrontation might give the Tigers an excuse to stay away from talks.

"The Tigers can now say they don't want talks with an unstable government," a Tamil legislator here said. "This crisis will have a serious bearing on the peace process."

Norwegian peace brokers and Japanese diplomats are working to persuade the Tigers to end their boycott and take part in negotiations aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

The premier also raised concerns about a planned donor conference Japan is hosting on June 9-10 to drum up international financial support to rebuild the country.

Militants seek US role to resolve Kashmir row

AFP, Srinagar

Separatists opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir called Sunday for a greater US role in resolving the decades-old dispute after a visit to South Asia by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.

The US envoy visited India and Pakistan, which each control sections of Kashmir and claim it in full, to build on recent peace overtures between the arch-rivals aimed at easing a year and a half of hostility.

"We welcome the stand taken by the United States that India and Pakistan need to address all the issues through dialogue," said Omar Farooq, Kashmir's chief Muslim cleric and a leading separatist.

"We are hopeful that the US will play a greater role in pursuing the path of peace in South Asia for which it is inevitable that the Kashmir issue is resolved," Farooq told AFP.

Before returning home Saturday Armitage said he was "cautiously optimistic" that India and Pakistan were on a path to normalise relations, after talks with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"I am cautiously optimistic that the process begun by the act of statesmanship by the prime minister of India could possibly lead to a step-by-step process that would eventually resolve all issues" between India and Pakistan, Armitage said.

Farooq welcomed Armitage's remarks.

"The US envoy has rightly said that the India-Pakistan thaw can lead to a step-by-step process to resolve all the issues," he said.

"We hope that the people of Kashmir would also be involved as dialogue goes on," said Farooq.

Armitage on Saturday also called for an end to violence in Kashmir.

"The fact of the matter is that people are dying. And whenever people die, whenever women and children and innocent non-combatants die for political purposes, one has to call that terrorism," he said.

There are nearly a dozen Muslim guerrilla groups fighting in Kashmir who want to secede from India and join neighbouring Pakistan. Many Kashmiri Muslims favour total independence from both countries.

Everest buzzing with activity ahead of golden jubilee celebrations

AFP, Kathmandu

From an armless Sherpa to teams of Indian and Nepalese soldiers and scores of rookie "commercial" climbers, Everest is buzzing with mountaineers readying to scramble to the summit as part of celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of its conquest.

Mountaineering officials in the Nepalese capital Kathmandu say a record 25 expeditions are waiting for the weather to clear on the world's highest mountain so they can launch their various assaults on the peak.

Each team comprises about 14 people, half of them Nepalese Sherpas acting as guides, according to the deputy president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association, Ang Phurba Sherpa.

However, an Indian-Nepalese military group tackling Everest as part of a joint cooperation programme comprises 36 people alone, he said.

"We estimate there could be 400 to 500 people wanting to summit as part of the golden jubilee celebrations," Phurba said.

In an average year only about half that number attempt to tame the 8,850 metre (29,035 feet) monster.

"We've never had so many people on the mountain at one time," said a tourism ministry official, who would not be identified.

"It is very crowded, but it is a big mountain," the official told AFP, adding that the Nepalese government was "very happy" so many mountaineers had joined in the golden jubilee celebrations.

The festivities climax with a grand party in Kathmandu on May 29, the anniversary of the day 50 years ago when Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and New Zealand bekeeper Sir Edmund Hillary conquered the mountain.

The government, waiving visa fees, has invited every person who has ever summited Everest -- and there are about 1,000 of them from 63 nations, although around 180 died on the mountain -- to visit Nepal for the occasion.



PHOTO: AFP

Workers go about disinfecting various homes and buildings in the outskirts of Beijing on Sunday. China warned it was facing an escalating Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis in the countryside as millions of migrant workers threatened to spread the disease to fragile rural regions.

India test fires Astra missile again

AP, New Delhi

India test-fired a new air-to-air missile for the second time in three days Sunday, a local news agency reported.

The Astra missile was fired from a test range at Chandipur, in the east coast state of Orissa, the Press Trust of India said.

The missile has a striking range of 15 to 25 miles and was developed by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation.

The Astra was first test fired from Chandipur on Friday.

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

Last week, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said his country was seeking friendship with neighbouring Pakistan, but would move cautiously toward restoring relations.

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

Vajpayee slams 'double standards' over nuclear non-proliferation

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee slammed what he called international double standards on non-proliferation Sunday, the fifth anniversary of New Delhi's surprise nuclear tests.

Without mentioning China or Pakistan by name, Vajpayee complained that countries in India's neighbourhood were guilty of missile or nuclear proliferation but had not attracted sanctions.

"Some guilty countries even continue to receive liberal economic assistance," Vajpayee said in a speech to defence scientists.

He said India, by contrast, had exercised self-imposed restraint on the transfer of nuclear, missile and dual-use technologies and materials.

"We have denied ourselves many lucrative contracts and joint ventures. We have never received any recognition for this," Vajpayee said.

Five years ago, India took the world by surprise by coming out of the nuclear closet. India's arch-rival Pakistan quickly conducted its own nuclear tests.

The United States soon imposed sanctions on both countries that were lifted only after India and Pakistan joined the US-led "coalition against terrorism" following the September 11, 2001

attacks.

India says China is actively helping Pakistan in its nuclear and missile programme and has raised the issue with Beijing several times. Beijing denies transferring nuclear and missile technology to Islamabad.

India had also cited China, with which it fought a brief but bloody war in 1962, as a reason for going nuclear.

However, some US sanctions on dual-use and high-technology transfers to India remain in place from the early 1970s.

Referring to the nuclear tests, Vajpayee said: "It was a difficult political decision in response to the harsh realities of our security environment."

"Our tests were also a major technological achievement in the face of stringent sanctions and technology import restrictions."

Vajpayee urged scientists to keep refining domestic weapons systems.

"There can be no respite. War fighting technologies are constantly being upgraded," he said.

"Recent military conflicts in our neighbourhood have graphically demonstrated this. They underline the importance of overwhelming technological superiority over an adversary. Technological innovation is a continuing imperative," he said.