

Vajpayee serious about peace, says Jamali

IANs, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali said Atal Bihari Vajpayee is "serious and sincere" about restoring peace in the region and hopes that hawks in both countries will not derail the process.

"He is serious that peace should come in and both countries should develop people-to-people contacts," Jamali said in an interview with the BBC.

Pakistan, Jamali said, was ready for talks at "any level" but cautioned against hardliners on both sides who may want to derail the nascent process.

"The unfortunate part is having some of the hawks on both sides," Jamali contended.

"I think a few gestures and acts

have to be made so that we can get to a consensus at a level where we could take proper and appropriate decisions," said Jamali, who came to power following elections last year.

The Daily Times reported Saturday that the first meeting between the two prime ministers could take place either at the U.N. General Assembly session in September or at SAARC summit that Pakistan has proposed be held in Islamabad in the first half of December.

Jamali told the BBC that Vajpayee provided an opening by offering a "hand of friendship" and Pakistan picked up the "impetus" to end the 17-month deadlock on the sub-continent since the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament that New Delhi blamed on terrorist groups backed

by Islamabad.

The two countries had staged their biggest military mobilisation in 50 years, amassing more than a million troops along their winding frontier. India unilaterally de-escalated in October 2002.

Since Vajpayee's dramatic offer, made in Srinagar in April, both countries have upgraded their diplomatic relations and announced their intention to resume air, road and rail links.

"This was the deadlock which I inherited," and that was why, Jamali said, he "grabbed the opportunity" offered by Vajpayee to end the impasse.

Jamali stressed that the two countries, which have fought two wars over Kashmir, should resume their dialogue to resolve all outstanding issues.

"It has to be a step-by-step measure," Jamali maintained.

Holding that negotiations were the only way to get over contentious issues, he said: "You cannot fight wars, there has to be dialogue".

Earlier an AFP report says, India's hardline Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani said Friday India was not asking Pakistan to change its stand on Kashmir but to change its views on "terrorism".

"I want to emphasise that we are not asking them (Pakistan) to abandon their views on Kashmir but change their views on terrorism," Advani told reporters on board an aircraft on the way to the western commercial hub of Bombay, the Press Trust of India (PTI) newsagency reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Indian Sikh boys hold the picture of their father at the Wagha border checkpoint on Saturday as they wait for his release from a Pakistani jail. 20 prisoners, including 14 crew members of the stranded Indian boat 'Raj Lakshmi' and six Sikhs who were apprehended for allegedly crossing into Pakistan from Iran without valid documents are to be released today as part of confidence building measures between India and Pakistan.

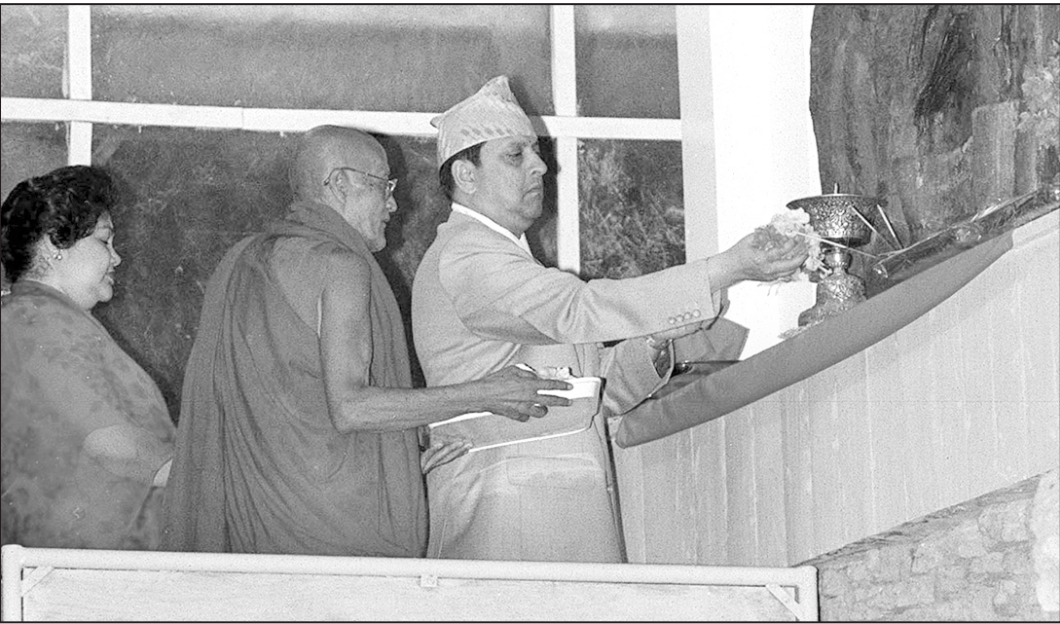


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese King Gyanendra (R) and Queen Komal (L) inaugurate the Maya Devi temple at Lumbini 400 km south west of Kathmandu on Friday on the occasion of the 2547th anniversary of the birth of Buddha. The temple named after Buddha's mother has been reconstructed at a cost of eight million dollars after the original 1930's one fell into disrepair.

No plan for ceasefire in Kashmir: Fernandes

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes Saturday said there were no immediate plans for a ceasefire in Kashmir.

When asked if New Delhi was planning to implement a fresh truce in the insurgency-wracked region, Fernandes said: "No, there are no such plans."

India declared a ceasefire in November 2000 which was called off nine months later as militants continued their operations.

A recent thaw in relations between arch-rivals India and Pakistan had raised hopes of another truce in the state, where more than 38,000 people have died in an anti-Indian Muslim insur-

gency since 1989. Separatists and Pakistan put the toll twice as high.

The defence minister welcomed the warming relations with Pakistan which began after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" on April 18.

"If there is friendship between the two countries it is good," he said, but added the resumption of talks between the two nuclear-armed rivals will take time.

"So far the talk of dialogue has not come," he told a news conference in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

"First both (India and Pakistan) will have to build confidence, the situation has to normalise and only that will create a conducive envi-

ronment to promote talks," he said.

Fernandes welcomed Islamabad's decision to release 20 Indian prisoners.

"We had been telling them (the Pakistanis) that our people are there in the jails, they had been denying that even at the highest level," he said.

"But now they have said they would be sending back 20 prisoners, we welcome it and it is a big confidence building measure," he said.

He also called for those opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir to shun separatism.

"My message to them is to come and join the national mainstream and work towards the development of the state."

Scientists discover SARS antibody

PTI, Beijing

Scientists in China have claimed to have discovered Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) antibodies that may one day help immunise people against the killer epidemic, a report said here on Saturday.

"Two kinds of antibodies were discovered in SARS patients by a medical team working in south China's Guangdong province where the disease first surfaced in November last year", China Daily reported.

The antibodies have been identified as IGG and IGM after three months of hard work.

"IGG is very much like a protective antibody and every SARS patient has it when they recuperate," Li Gang, a medical researcher with the No 3 hospital of Zhangshan University in Guangdong's capital, Guangzhou said.

Like the antibody against

Hepatitis A, the protective IGG is very likely to make SARS patients immune to the disease in future, he said, while predicting that vaccines would be developed using the antibody to immunise people against SARS.

He also suggested that medical staff in close contact with SARS patients can improve their immunity by injecting IGG abstracted from the serum of recovering SARS patients.

The medical team started its research on February 2, testing the serum of 21 SARS patients. They could not find the antibody in the blood serum of people who had been infected by SARS for a week or less, the report said.

But IGM was detected during the second week of infection disappearing 90 days after the patients were infected with the virus. Similarly, IGG appears two weeks after catching the disease, with all patients registering the antibody after recovery.

Fears mount over SARS misdiagnosis in China

Taiwan cuts links to mainland

AFP, Hong Kong

The World Health Organisation has cautioned that a decline in new SARS infections in China could be due to misdiagnosis rather than a slowing of the outbreak, as Taiwan Saturday suspended direct links with the mainland in a bid to control the fatal disease.

The news was better in Hong Kong, with a WHO official saying he believes the outbreak, which has killed 243 and sickened more than 1,710 in the territory has been brought under control.

In Singapore, the government was buoyed by the results of medical tests which showed that suspected SARS patients and staff from a mental institute all tested negative for the deadly virus, bringing the city-state one step closer to being declared free of the pneumonia-like respiratory illness.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has so far claimed more than 600 lives around the world, with the bulk of deaths and infections occurring in China.

Beijing has recently reported a decline in the number of new cases in the capital, but the WHO warned in a statement Saturday that this may be due to misdiagnosis rather than the containment of the disease.

Beijing reported 19 new probable SARS cases Saturday, the seventh consecutive day the city has reported less than 50 probable infections by the virus for which there is no cure nor vaccine.

A few weeks ago, it was reporting an average of 100 probable cases daily.

"WHO officials fear that patients with milder symptoms of SARS are being excluded as probable cases," the UN agency said.

Beijing has had 145 SARS deaths and 2,420 confirmed cases, bearing the brunt of the nationwide death toll of 282 and 5,209 infections.

The WHO stressed it did not believe the low number of new cases was another cover up by the Chinese government, merely confusion about the virus.

Doctor Daniel Chin, leading the WHO team of specialists investigating SARS in Beijing, said any misdiagnosis could be because of "confusion over the case definition, not because clinicians were trying to hide cases."

The Chinese government initially ignored the epidemic, which originated in the southern province of Guangdong, and only revealed the extent of the disease on April 20.

As the battle to contain the disease on the latest serious front,

Taiwan, stepped up Saturday, authorities announced the suspension of direct transport links with China.

Ferry links between the Chinese mainland via the Kinmen islands near the southeastern province of Fujian have been closed, the Mainland Affairs Council said. Taiwan closed the links via the Matsu islands on March 31.

Taiwan made the decision as it reported its highest number of new infections in a single day -- 34 -- on Saturday. Taiwan has now had 35 deaths from 308 cases, according to the Department of Health. Another SARS death, that of a doctor, has not yet been confirmed by the authority.

Hong Kong's health authorities reported five new deaths Saturday and four more cases in a sign the territory has moved away from double-digit infections.

Meanwhile, the economic toll from SARS continued to mount with Thailand's Bangkok Post reporting tourist arrivals down by 46 percent in April and 55 percent so far for May.

And China announced there will be no ceremony on June 1 to mark the closure of the sluice gates at the 25 billion-dollar Three Gorges Dam on China's Yangtze river due to SARS.

UP minister sacked over murder of poetess

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

An influential minister in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh ruled by Chief Minister Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party and its coalition partner BJP was sacked on Saturday following a political storm over his alleged role in the murder of a young poetess.

Submitting to growing demand from the opposition parties as well as BJP, Mayawati removed Amar Mani Tripathi, who was minister for Stamps and Stationery, almost a week after the killing of poetess Madhumita Shukla at her residence in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh.

The death of Madhumita has sparked a fierce controversy with Mayawati's political rivals Samajwadi Party and Congress demanding the dismissal of Tripathi and a probe by the federal investigating agency CBI into the killing.

Mayawati told reporters in Lucknow today that her government has handed over the probe into the killing to Crime Investigation Department (CID) and Tripathi would be out of the government till the probe was completed.

She however, made it clear that Tripathi would be re-inducted into the ministry of the probe absolves him.

Bangkok seeks KL's help to end border violence

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN, Bangkok

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday instructed Interior Minister Wan Muhamad Nor Matta to request Malaysia's help to tackle violence in the country's southern provinces.

The Thai premier told reporters he had asked Mr Wan Nor to closely work with his Malaysian counterpart to help in quickly ending the violence that has been attributed to cross-border bandits and criminal gangs.

On Thursday Mr Wan Nor had downplayed concern about violent crimes including the murder of police officers in the south, saying considerable progress had been made on several cases and the level of violence was now 80 per cent less than in previous years. But yesterday, gunmen fatally shot a police officer in southern Thailand's Narathiwat province in the ninth violent attack against security personnel in recent months.

Musharraf asks Pak opposition to give up agitation

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has asked the opposition parties to give up their agitation against his constitutional amendments, saying it was a "waste of time".

In his address to the Pakistan Development Forum (PDF) recently, Musharraf said the Legal Framework Order which incorporates the amendments was not an issue before the people of Pakistan.

Instead, he asked the politicians to focus on rebuilding the country. "Let's get on with building Pakistan and not waste our time on LFO and whatever," he said adding that "we are wasting our time on a subject which the people of Pakistan are not interested in."

The opposition is agitating against Musharraf holding both the offices of the President and the Chief of the Army.

Norwegian envoy meets Tigers to salvage talks

AFP, Colombo

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen travelled to rebel-held northern Sri Lanka Saturday in a renewed bid to jumpstart stalled peace talks, officials and rebels said.

Helgesen travelled in a military helicopter to the northern town of Kilinochchi, 330 kilometres (206 miles) north of here, for talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), officials said.

LTTE officials in Kilinochchi contacted by telephone said Helgesen was due to open talks with the rebel leadership on the impasse in the Norwegian-brokered peace process.

Helgesen stayed on here after a similar mission on Thursday with his Foreign Minister, Jan Petersen, failed to persuade the Tigers to abandon their talks boycott.

Both Petersen and Helgesen met with LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, but there was no breakthrough and they failed to convince the Tigers to attend a key donor conference in Japan on June 9-10.

Japan's special peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, also failed this week to end the stalemate. A Wednesday deadline he set for the Tigers to confirm attendance at the aid-pleging meeting in Tokyo passed with no response.

Akashi said it was not possible to reschedule the donor conference, which is to be opened by Japanese Prime Minister

Junichiro Koizumi.

Helgesen travelled to the north after extensive consultations with the Sri Lankan peace negotiating team in the capital Colombo, officials and diplomats said.

The Tigers are insisting on pre-conditions before ending their boycott of talks and attending the Tokyo aid conference, arguing there has been no delivery on promises made during six rounds of face-to-face negotiations with the Colombo government since September.

The Tigers have said, however, that they will still honour the ceasefire that went into effect on February 23 last year.

The Danish government has added its voice to the international chorus urging the Tigers to restart the stalled talks.

Denmark will release a million dollars to a North-East Rehabilitation Fund (NERF) managed by the World Bank to help rebuild Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northeast once the Tigers re-engage in talks, the Danish government said Friday.

Tamil sources said the LTTE leadership expressed concern that there was no legal status for NERF even though it is to be administered by the World Bank.

Washington, too, has asked the Tigers to attend the aid meet and not to scuttle the peace process that hopes to bring a political end to the island's ethnic conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

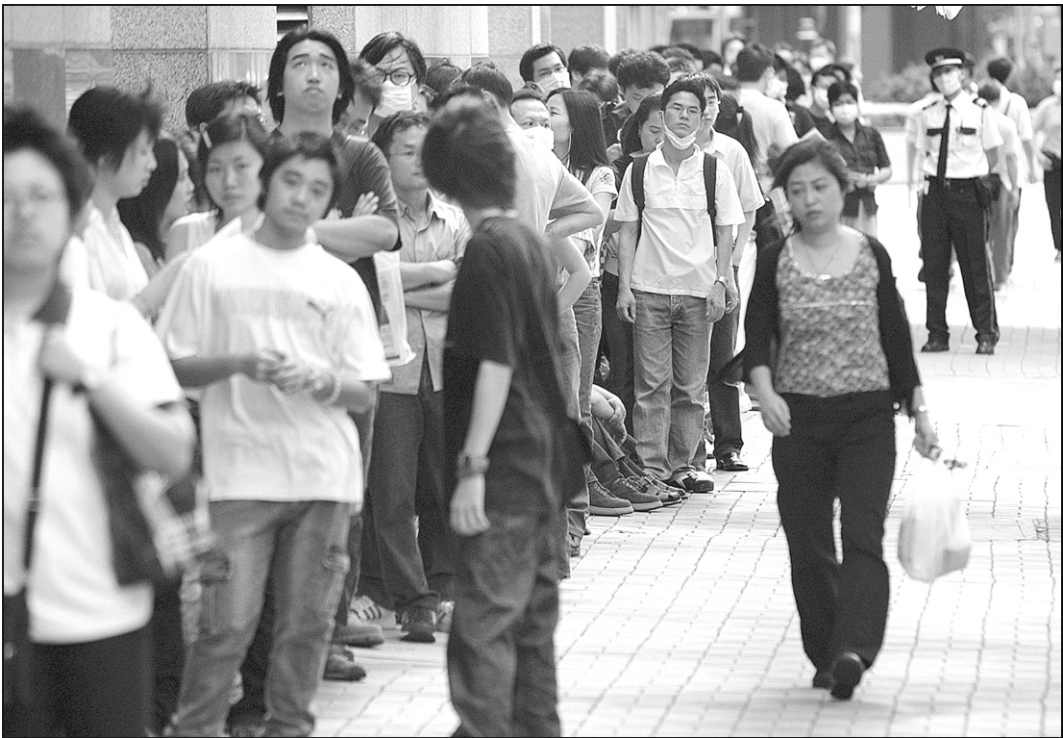


PHOTO: AFP

People with and without masks to ward off Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) line up for a job fair to open in the Wan Chai district of Hong Kong on Saturday. Thousands of people arrived many hours before a two-day job fair run by the Hong Kong Jockey Club was to open offering 600 full-time and 3,000 part-time jobs, as the territory tries to recover from an unemployment rate already at 7.5 per cent prior to the SARS impact.