



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani labourers at work at a rail track to India at Wagah Railway station on Saturday. The patchwork is part of the preparation for the resumption of rail travel between the two arch-rivals, Pakistan and India, for which initiatives are being taken from both sides.

Pakistan for 'decisive' talks with India

Pak govt calls inter-ministerial meet on MFN status to Delhi

PTI, Islamabad

Observing that it will approach the resumption of dialogue with India with utmost sincerity and an open mind, Pakistan has hoped that the planned future round of talks would prove "decisive" in settling all disputes, including Kashmir.

"We hope that future round of negotiations, when it materialises, would prove decisive in resolving all bilateral problems," Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar told the Geneva Forum of Disarmament on Friday.

Pakistan approached the resumption of dialogue with India with "utmost sincerity and an open mind" and expects the same from India, Khokhar was quoted by the official news agency APP as saying.

Khokhar accused India of "prevaricating" the right of self deter-

mination to Kashmiris and said that Pakistan was convinced that the "dispute" should be resolved peacefully as "there is no alternative to negotiations."

Equally clear, he said is the fact that viable peace would "continue to elude South Asia without a just settlement of this dispute in accordance with the aspirations of the Kashmiri people."

Referring to the new peace process between India and Pakistan, he said that there was a "stirring of a positive change" in New Delhi.

"We would like to count on its irreversibility since military brinkmanship is not a viable instrument of policy least of all in a nuclear theatre," he said.

Terming External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha's recent statements on India's right to take

pre-emptive action against Pakistan, "highly inflammatory", Kokhar said "induction of such concepts in a brittle security environment gravely enfeebled by unresolved conflicts and nuclear threats is most irresponsible. South Asia needs statesmanship not sabre-rattling."

Khokhar also reiterated Pakistan's opposition to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and claimed the government has taken several effective measures to curb the "so-called cross-border infiltration."

"Pakistan, on its part, is ready to face this test," he said.

IANS adds: The Pakistan government has called an inter-ministerial meeting here Monday to discuss granting most favoured nation (MFN) status to India, media reports said.

The meeting, to be hosted by the foreign ministry, will be attended by senior officials from the ministries of defence, railways, sports and culture, interior, foreign office and commerce.

"(It) would discuss resumption of a negotiation agenda for a possible resumption of dialogue between the two countries," The Dawn newspaper reported.

"(It) would discuss resumption of air, train, bus services and sports ties between the two countries as well as proposals for further enhancement in these areas," it added.

However, the "main task of the meeting would be to discuss the pros and cons of possible extension of the most favoured nation status to India and its likely implications on Pakistan's economy", the newspaper said.

Ferries crash in Manila Bay: 17 killed

AP, Manila

A passenger vessel carrying 193 people sank after colliding with a larger ferry Sunday in choppy waters at the mouth of Manila Bay. The coast guard said at least 17 people were killed and 132 had been rescued.

Search operations were under way for the other 44 who were aboard the M.V. San Nicolas, a passenger and cargo vessel that had been traveling to Manila from Coron, in western Palawan province. It collided with the Superferry 12 around 11:45 a.m. near Limbones Point, off Cavite province 33 nautical miles south of Manila and not far from Corregidor Island.

Coast guard commander Vice Admiral Reuben Lista said 132 people had been rescued and that several others were seen drifting toward shore.

Lista said the coast guard and navy were being aided by the crew of the Superferry 12, a helicopter and some commercial ships.

China, India step gingerly on mending ties

AFP, New Delhi

India and China will reaffirm their warming relations when their leaders meet in Europe next month but they must step past their border dispute and Pakistan's stand on Kashmir to normalise ties, experts say.

Chinese President Hu Jintao, on his first foreign tour since taking office in March, will meet Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in Russia and in France, before playing host to him in Beijing later in June.

India hopes the meetings on the wings of global events in Europe will form the basis of the Beijing meeting.

Sino-Indian ties have remained in a quagmire of mistrust since they fought a border war in 1962.

"The summit is of extreme importance and accordingly we are timetabling factors that could impinge on it," a top Indian official said in a hint of the ongoing moves to mend ties with China's closest

ally Pakistan.

India, which has fought two of three wars with Pakistan over Kashmir since 1947, has responded to Islamabad's overtures and has set in motion steps to resolve the ownership row over the divided Himalayan state.

"If our border dispute is a thorn in Sino-Indian ties then India-Pakistan relations are also an impediment in the way of restoring close ties with our largest neighbour," the Indian official said.

India accuses China of occupying 38,000 square kilometres (14,672 square miles) of territory in northwestern Kashmir while Beijing lays claim to 90,000 square kilometres (34,749 square miles) of land in India's Arunachal Pradesh state.

Officials from the two sides have met 15 times since the 1980s in a bid to convert a line of control across the disputed territory into a formal border, the talks resulting in an exchange of maps but, more importantly, a cessation of military

hostilities since 1996.

Sujit Dutta, an Indian expert on China, said the US-led war in Iraq, globalisation of markets and regional issues have begun to tell on the nerves of the leaderships in the world's two most populous nations.

"The whole relation is now being shaped by new factors as both are engaged in modernisation, worried by external security and the global situation," said Dutta.

"And finally there is this factor that the United States has emerged as the most powerful state. Sino-Indian relationships are being determined and driven by many of these factors," he added.

Dutta said that since China and India recognised that their border row as well as the normalisation of India-Pakistan relations were "complex and long-drawn," the two sides would have to step past them and start afresh.

Myanmar to introduce online visas

AFP, Yangon

Military-ruled Myanmar is set to become the first country in Asia to introduce online visas for visitors arriving by air, according to a media report here.

The project is to be implemented within the next few months, an official involved in the project, who declined to be named, said in a report in the forthcoming Monday edition of the Myanmar Times.

"We are holding discussions with the 12 airlines which fly to Myanmar to finalise arrangements for the system," he was quoted as saying.

Visa applications will be made at visa.gov.mm, with those approved receiving a print-out to present to immigration officers on arrival, the official added.

The only countries currently offering online visa applications were Australia, Canada and Russia, according to the official.

Myanmar has a notoriously strict immigration policy, especially with regard to international media and members of non-government organisations (NGOs) operating within the country.

N Korea agrees to include South, Japan in nuke talks

THE KOREA HERALD/ANN, Pyongyang

North Korea said it is willing to accept the US demand to include South Korea and Japan in multilateral talks on the North's nuclear arms development programme.

"The format of the talks does not present itself as an essential issue if the United States is truly willing to settle the problem," the North said in a statement Saturday night issued by its Foreign Ministry.

"It is the DPRK's (North Korea) stand that the DPRK-US talks should be held first and they may be followed by the US-proposed multilateral talks..." according to the statement carried by the North's official news outlet, the Korean Central News Agency.

It is the first time that the North has hinted at the possibility of agreeing on the US call for five-way multilateral nuclear talks to deal with the nuclear issue.

North Korea, the United States

and China opened their first three-way talks in Beijing in April to try to resolve the nuclear standoff between Pyongyang and Washington.

South Korea and Japan, which had hoped to participate in the talks, were left out because of Pyongyang's opposition.

During the Beijing talks, the North stunned the world by telling the United States that it already possesses nuclear weapons.

The North's apparent softening of its stance on the format of the nuclear talks came shortly after the

summit between US President George W. Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in Texas over the weekend.

In the talks, the two leaders vowed to take "tougher measures" if the North continues escalating its nuclear threat, urging Pyongyang to stop its "blackmail" tactics.

Japan reportedly welcomed North Korea's willingness to comply with a US demand to include Seoul and Tokyo in multilateral talks on the North's nuclear weapons programme.

China puts navigation sat in space

PTI, Beijing

China Sunday successfully established a complete strategic satellite navigation and positioning system by launching its third indigenously designed all-weather navigation satellite.

The rocket, 'Long March 3-a' carrying the 'Beidou' satellite blasted off from the Xichang satellite launching centre in southwest China's Sichuan province early today and 20 minutes after, the satellite separated from the rocket, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Differences led to removal of Geelani from APHC

AFP, Srinagar

A hardline pro-Pakistan separatist said Sunday he was removed by his party as its representative on Kashmir's main separatist alliance because of differences with its leaders.

Jamaat-e-Islami on Saturday replaced Syed Ali Geelani with moderate leader Sheikh Ali Mohammed as their member on the executive coterwarrant surgery two months ago, after doctors detected a cyst in one of his kidneys while he was in a jail in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand.

He was arrested by the police in June last year on charges of funding the region's dominant militant group Hizbul Mujahedin, but was released on parole in March so he could seek medical treatment.

On Sunday Geelani denied he was replaced because he had not been attending Hurriyat meetings due to illness.

He said he had not been at the meetings because the organisation had not taken action against another of its members, the Peoples Conference (PC) party, for participating in last year's state elections.



PHOTO: AFP

Two playful tigers frolic as they cool off at the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad during another hot day in the state of Andhra Pradesh on Sunday. At least 148 people have died from scorching heat over the past week in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, with the worst-hit districts on the Bay of Bengal, where the mercury in mid-week hit 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit).

Chandrika makes first big step to topple govt

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's party was making its first major step towards toppling the cohabitation government by forming an alliance with Marxists, party officials said Sunday.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), which is the main opposition in the 225-member legislature, will ratify a deal with the JVP, or People's Liberation Front, on Tuesday, they said.

"This is a first step towards increasing the numbers in parliament and then moving towards winning defections from the government side to form a government without facing elections," a top party source said.

He said a memorandum of understanding between the PA and the JVP, drafted in Sinhalese, set out agreements on economic policy, the ongoing peace process and the political aspects of power sharing between them.

JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa, who is also a member of parliament, declined to give details of the deal with the president, but said last week that the plan included measures to "revive and rebuild the nation."

"The talks have been very satisfactory and we have made progress. We will announce the details later," he said.

The opposition has been talking about an alliance between Kumaratunga's party and the JVP for six months after the two opened unity talks in a bid to topple the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Wickremesinghe, whose rival United National Party (UNP) won parliamentary elections in December 2001, has been locked in a tense stand-off with Kumaratunga.

The prime minister refuses to recognise the president's take over of the Development Lottery Board which is under the Economic Reforms Ministry, but Kumaratunga argues her move was constitutionally valid.

However, opposition sources said their move would initially be made through parliament, where the prime minister currently has only a slender two-seat majority.

The JVP has 16 seats in parliament and with Kumaratunga's party's share, they would collectively move up to 93 seats -- still 20 short to have a working majority in the assembly.

Nepal mulls citizenship for Bhutanese refugees

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has quietly agreed to consider citizenship for some of the Bhutanese refugees living in the country for more than a decade, prompting criticism by rights activists and opponents of the government.

The foreign ministers of Nepal and Bhutan held talks in Kathmandu last week that had been expected to finalise repatriation for at least some of the 100,000 refugees, but instead they agreed only to hold more negotiations in August in Thimphu.

In the fine print, however, for the first time Nepal has agreed to give some of the refugees citizenship.

The state-run Bhutanese newspaper Kuensel reported that those who "emigrated" to Nepal and "who do not wish to return to Bhutan, will be given the option to apply for Nepalese citizenship in

accordance with the laws of the kingdom of Nepal."

The refugees are predominantly Hindus of Nepalese origin who left in the early 1990s as Bhutan instituted reforms they say obliged them to wear the Buddhist kingdom's dress and use its language.

At the heart of the dispute is whether they were forced out. Bhutan, which denies any anti-Hindu agenda, has agreed to repatriate all who were forcibly evicted but contends that most of the refugees left voluntarily.

Ratan Gazmere, a Nepal-based activist for the Bhutanese refugees, said it was a "black day" if some of the Bhutanese would not be returning home.

He called on the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which administers the seven refugee camps in southern Nepal, to intervene in the negotiations "and stop a crisis."



PHOTO: AFP

An Acehese (C) tries to comfort a 22-year-old woman (R) and her three-year-old son (L) in shock after unidentified forces bomb their village in Lhokseumawe, in the troubled Indonesian province of Aceh on Sunday. A series of explosions rocked the district town of Lhokseumawe in North Aceh as the death toll continued to mount on Sunday, the seventh day of a massive operation to hunt down separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebels.

Famine a new threat as war rages in Aceh

THE JAKARTA POST/ANN, Banda Aceh

After six days of clashes between the Indonesian Military (TNI) and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) separatists, famine became a real possibility as staple foods ran out in several parts of the province.

Muhammad, a resident of Jeumpa subdistrict in Bireuen regency, said the regency had been suffering from electricity blackouts since the beginning of the military operation on Monday, and residents had started to skip meals as food was scarce in the isolated area.

"We only have a limited supply of staple foods, and sometimes we share our meals with neighbors who were unable to find food," the 65-year-old told The Jakarta Post on Saturday.

The Post saw electricity poles and trees felled along the road connecting Bireuen and the provincial capital of Banda Aceh.