

Hopes for another Indo-Pak summit rising: Fernandes

'India, China to raise ties to higher level'

AFP, Singapore

The recent warming of ties between India and Pakistan has raised hopes for another summit between their leaders, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said here Sunday.

"We are looking forward to maybe a slow movement upwards, nevertheless a very definite movement towards having a summit between the two (leaders)," he said at the end of the two-day annual Asia Security Conference in Singapore.

"So it's something very, very positive that is happening in the subcontinent."

Fernandes said that following Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's "last effort" to repair damaged ties with Pakistan, there has been a "positive response" from Islamabad and in the international community.

The latest development is a visit by a group of Pakistani MPs to India and a planned reciprocal trip by Indian parliamentarians to Pakistan.

Business executives have also started interacting and the media on both sides have been supportive, he said.

"We are currently in the process of confidence-building," Fernandes

said.

In April, Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan ending a 17-month deadlock following a militant attack on the Indian parliament in 2001.

The two nations have since reappointed their ambassadors and are discussing ways to revive air, bus and train links which were cut after the parliament attack.

On Saturday, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said Washington was "very pleased" with warming relations between the nuclear rivals.

Wolfowitz met Fernandes on the sidelines of the conference on Saturday.

AP adds: Both countries are pursuing a number of "confidence building measures," such as restoring diplomatic ties and direct travel with each other, in the hope that it will ultimately lead to a summit where their leaders can resolve their differences, Fernandes' secretary C.K. Mishra said, explaining his boss's comment.

"No dates have been set and nothing has been discussed, but if there is a summit, yes, of course, it will be between the leaders of India and Pakistan," Mishra said.

Fernandes' comment came after his ministry repeated warnings in its annual report on Friday

that it was concerned that Islamic hardline groups in Pakistan may gain access to weapons of mass destruction.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over the Himalayan territory since they won independence from Britain in 1947. India accuses Pakistan of training and arming the militants - a charge denied by Islamabad.

The two sides nearly started a third war after Islamic militants attacked India's Parliament in December, 2001. Intense lobbying from Washington and other nations led to both sides backing down.

"The situation on the Indian subcontinent has radically altered... There is a new sentiment to Jammu and Kashmir," Fernandes said.

Another AFP report says, India and China are moving to raise trade and defence ties to a higher level, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said Sunday.

The two Asian giants share similar problems and are at about the same level of economic development, he said.

"There are efforts made on both sides to see that our relations... are raised to a higher level," he told reporters at the end of an Asia Pacific conference of defence ministers here.

In the past four to five years, two-way trade has expanded to reach five billion dollars, he said, growing from just a few hundred million dollars in the 1990s.

Both countries are also expanding an exchange program involving military officers to be posted for training in each other's institutions in order to increase the level of confidence-building, he said.

Asked about the future of India-China defence ties, he said: "We would like to build a very close relationship but that will take time."

Fernandes visited China in April in the first trip by an Indian defence minister since 1992.

India and China fought a brief but bitter border war in 1962 and have since shared an uneasy relationship of mutual distrust. The two countries are trying to resolve territorial disputes.

Ties began warming when then Chinese prime minister Zhu Rongji visited India in January last year.

Fernandes caused a diplomatic storm in 1998 when he suggested that China, not arch-rival Pakistan, was the cause of concern that led India to develop nuclear weapons.



A Myanmar boy holds a picture of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a demonstration demanding democracy in front of the Myanmar Embassy in Tokyo on Sunday. Military authorities took pro-democracy leader Suu Kyi into custody and closed her party's headquarters on Saturday.



Indian tribal women, Angiyo Yobin (L) and Nabuye Yobin wait for a military plane at an airstrip in the farthest eastern civilian post of Vijaynagar on May 28. The airforce, which provides logistics to troops fighting insurgents, is also helping civilians in border villages near China and Myanmar borders in efforts to win over their loyalty.

Train derails in Bihar: One killed

AFP, New Delhi

One person was killed and at least 20 injured as 14 coaches of a passenger train derailed in the eastern Indian state of Bihar early Sunday, the Hindi news channel Aaj Tak said.

The express was travelling between Bihar's state capital Patna and the Indian capital New Delhi when the accident occurred.

Senior railway officials in New Delhi said the cause of the accident had not yet been determined.

Indian Railways, one of the world's most antiquated rail systems, carries 13 million passengers daily.

In April, the state-run utility unveiled plans for a massive upgrade of tracks, bridges and signals to reduce the high number of accidents.

It earmarked a sizeable chunk from its planned expenditure of 106.07 billion rupees (2.20 billion US dollars) in the financial year to March 2004 for passenger safety measures.

Last month, 38 people were burnt alive when a blaze broke out on the prestigious Frontier Mail in the northern state of Punjab.

Last week, two more incidents of engines and coaches catching fire were reported from Punjab.

Asian security meet calls on N Korea to disarm, lauds anti-terror drive

AFP, Singapore

North Korea dominated three days of security talks between Western and Asian defence chiefs that finished here Sunday, with a consensus among all 220 delegates that Pyongyang must dismantle its nuclear weapons program, organisers said.

"Everybody agrees in all of the countries in the region, except the North Koreans, that it's unacceptable for North Korea to have nuclear weapons," Gary Samore, from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), said at the end of the Asian Security Conference.

US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz attended the conference on Saturday with his main message a call for a united regional stance to pressure Pyongyang.

Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill delivered a message to Pyongyang that the United States and its allies were now fully focused on forcing it to dismantle its nuclear program following the US-led war that ended Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq.

"On the weapons of mass destruction front, the emphasis clearly has now switched from Iraq to North Korea," Hill told reporters after the end of the conference, which the IISS organised.

However although there was consensus on the final goal of trying to keep the Korean peninsula nuclear free, there was little agreement on how this would be achieved.

Some at the conference were disappointed that the United States

was intent on brokering a common stance with China, South Korea, Russia and Japan without a bigger role for the United Nations.

"Given the global nature of the challenge, there was little objection from the participants when an Australian analyst indicated that the United Nations Security Council would have to be brought into the picture," IISS chairman Professor Francois Heisbourg said.

"However I'm afraid... the damage done during the Iraq crisis makes it more difficult to travel down the United Nations Security Council route."

Samore, the IISS's director of studies, said there was little indication South Korea and China supported tentative US proposals to impose economic sanctions against North Korea.

"China and South Korea are in particular very concerned that a policy of sanctions would be very dangerous," Samore said.

"It could either cause North Korea to react in a very negative way, perhaps even in a violent way."

"Or it could cause North Korea to collapse, which from Seoul and Beijing's standpoint would be very destabilising for them."

Although North Korea overshadowed the conference, which was the first major security meeting attended by international defence ministers since the Iraq war, terrorism, India-Pakistan relations and US military bases in the Asia Pacific were also high on the agenda.

S Korea fires warning shots at North's boats

AP, Seoul

South Korea's navy fired warning shots on Sunday after eight North Korean fishing boats entered the South's territory along the western sea border, South Korea's Defence Ministry said. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

The fishing boats turned back when South Korea's navy ships fired shots into the sky near Yongpyong Island west of the Korean peninsula, a ministry spokesman said.

It was the sixth encounter between North and South Korean boats along the disputed western sea border in the past seven days.

South Korea's Defense Ministry said it sent a strong message to North Korea to come up with "responsible measures" that would prevent further incursions.

"We make it clear that North Korea will be held completely responsible for any incidents that arise from North Korean boats violating the Northern Limit Line along the west border," the ministry said in a statement.

The maritime border between the two Koreas is not clearly marked, and North Korean fishing boats occasionally cross over into South Korean waters during the crab catching season, which peaks in June.

South Korea is studying whether the repeated violations are intentional, a military spokesman said. It sent a protest letter to North Korea on Wednesday, urging Pyongyang to prevent such crossings.

Lankan peace hopes dim as Tigers stick to guns

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peace prospects have dimmed as Tamil Tiger rebels resist international pressure and insist on political power ahead of a final settlement, diplomats and officials said Sunday.

After labelling six rounds of negotiations with the Colombo government as a "waste of time," the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Friday rejected an offer of greater financial authority in return for ending their boycott of peace talks.

"The Tigers are making a serious miscalculation by not attending talks, and particularly the donors meeting in Tokyo," a senior western diplomat here said referring to the aid pledging conference Japan is hosting on June 9-10.

The diplomat said the Tigers may be underestimating the will of the United States, European nations, Japan and neighbouring India in strongly backing the Norwegian-led peace initiative to end Sri Lanka's ethnic bloodshed.

However, the LTTE's London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, said Friday the rebels were unhappy with the international

community's increased role in Sri Lanka.

"We are also concerned over the growing involvement in the peace process of formidable international forces from whom you have been soliciting not only aid but the setting up of a grand international 'safety net' to bring undue pressure on the freedom of our people to determine their political status and destiny," Balasingham said in a letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The LTTE pulled out of peace talks on April 21 and since then there have been growing demands, including from the G8 foreign ministers, that the Tigers resume talks and attend the Tokyo donors conference.

The Tigers, who declared a truce in December 2001, criticised the international community for treating them "shabbily".

Four previous bids for peace since 1985 have ended in failure and led to more bloodshed in a country where more than 60,000 people have been killed in fighting since 1972.

Asian diplomats said prospects of an early resumption of peace

talks were dashed Friday when the LTTE rejected the government's offer to give them greater financial authority.

The LTTE insisted it needed an "interim administrative structure," or an effective mechanism to give it political power in the war-torn northern and eastern regions before a final peace settlement.

Asian diplomats said the latest LTTE demand was also placing increased pressure on the cohabitation government of Wickremesinghe, who faces a hostile president who has hinted that the government may be sacked.

The president's party is about to clinch a deal with the main Marxist group in parliament as a first step to toppling the government which has a slender two-seat majority in the 225-member national parliament.

"It is bad news on two fronts for the government, the talks are not going well and the president is sharpening her daggers," an Asian diplomat said.

The president's party has slammed the Norwegian peace brokers, describing them as "salmon-eating international busy

bodies," and called for a review of Oslo's role.

Such demands are seen by diplomats as a sign that Kumaratunga is keen to appease her emerging Marxist ally, the JVP or People's Liberation Front, which opposes Norway's involvement in the peace process.

The silver lining for the Wickremesinghe government remains the pledge that the Tigers may not return to war even though they are unhappy with the pace of the peace process.

The LTTE's political wing leader, S.P. Thamilselvan, told reporters in the northern rebel-held town of Kilinochchi on May 22 there would be no return to armed conflict and the rebels would abide by the truce.

"If the prime minister demonstrates that he could implement the decisions, it would be adequate for the LTTE to participate in talks," Thamilselvan said.

However, the prime minister's response has been to ask the Tigers to be more understanding. Diplomats say that unless both sides are more flexible, there is no immediate prospect of breaking the impasse.



A general view of the Water and Music Show in front of the Peterhof Palace late Saturday in Saint Petersburg during celebrations marking the 300-year anniversary of Russia former imperial city.