

Delhi making secret moves to solve Ayodhya row

AFP, New Delhi

The Centre has moved to defuse the Ayodhya crisis through talks rather than law courts, according to government and BJP sources.

"It is a very serious move and has the blessings at the highest level," one source said. "For the first time, negotiations are being held totally leaving aside the political parties. It's a religious interface."

The sources said over past months, secret parleys have been held between leaders of Hindus and Muslims, "and a very large, influential group of Muslim leadership is moving forward."

The Muslim Personal Law Board, a nodal body concerned with Indian Muslim interests, has denied categorically, however, that its leaders are involved in any talks.

Despite the public denials, the sources insist that talks are indeed taking place but that "names of groups and leaders" cannot be

revealed at this stage.

The Ayodhya issue, which has defied a solution for more than five decades, revolves around a claim by Hindus that the Babri Mosque was built in the northern city of Ayodhya in the 16th century by Mughul emperor Babur after destroying a temple at the place of birth of Lord Ram.

For decades, a low-profile campaign to reclaim the land was run by some Hindu outfits but in mid-80s the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party took it over.

Within a few years, the rights to the land became a polarising, nationwide issue.

The BJP's vigorous campaign for a rebuilding of the temple led to the eventual demolition of the Babri mosque by mobs of Hindu zealots on December 6, 1992, which in turn sparked nationwide riots that left thousands dead.

Solutions to the Ayodhya imbroglio have since been fruitlessly

worked and reworked at various levels, and eventually wound up in the law courts.

A court recently ordered that land beneath the ruins of the mosque be dug up to determine whether a temple had once existed on the site, a process which is still ongoing.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has launched and re-launched formal and informal talks on the issue several times, and created a special unit known as the "Ayodhya cell" in the prime minister's office.

A spate of talks have concluded without success, although the most recent initiative -- termed "track II" by political observers -- is by far the most serious.

According to a tentative plan being mulled by both sides, if Muslims agree to Hindus building a temple on the site of the razed mosque, they could be given land to build a mosque at an alternative site, five kilometers (three miles)

from the temple's sanctum sanctorum, the sources said.

Another 100 mosques in the area closed in the wake of the Babri mosque demolition could be reopened.

Members of the Muslim leadership, the sources said, were willing to move forward if talks proceeded along these lines.

"They have said if these assurances are given, they are willing to talk further," one source said.

Vajpayee on Sunday openly asked parties to ignore the Ayodhya issue.

"It is clear that the Ayodhya issue can be resolved only when it is freed from politics and when political parties stop looking at it from the point of view of who gains and who loses," Vajpayee said.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinians flee as the car of Hamas leader Abdul Aziz al-Rantissi burn after it was attacked by Israeli helicopter missiles in Gaza City on Tuesday. Al-Rantissi was wounded in the Israeli helicopter raid in Gaza City that killed his bodyguard, Palestinian medical sources said.

60 workers kidnapped in Peru

AFP, Lima

Sixty heavily-armed gunmen stormed a firm's camp of the Argentine worker Techint in southern Peru Monday, kidnapping about 60 staffers working on a natural gas pipeline, Defense Minister Aurelio Loret de Mola said.

Loret de Mola said "a group of 60 armed delinquents" was behind the abduction of the workers, who he said included eight foreigners.

Ayacucho police earlier said there were 100 armed assailants who moved on the camp, known as Tocate in Ayacucho department some 600 km southeast of Lima.

A police spokesman said the foreigners included Argentines, Colombians and Chileans.

The kidnapers were seeking a ransom, an Ayacucho police intelligence official said. He called them "terrorists," but declined to say if authorities had linked them with the Maoist Shining Path or any other known group.

Techint's office in Lima said only that it had been victim of a "violent episode," without disclosing further details.

Ayacucho is the region where the Shining Path rebels rose up in May 1980. While the group is now considered to have been mostly broken up, it has claimed involvement in isolated violent incidents in that area.



PHOTO: AFP
A Cougar helicopter of the French Army evacuates UN and EU personnel together with certain diplomats from the EU compound in Monrovia on Monday as fighting in the civil war has reached the edge of the Liberian capital.

UN envoy says Suu Kyi is unhurt

REUTERS, Yangon

A UN envoy to Myanmar met Suu Kyi on Tuesday and said she was uninjured and "in good spirits" but that work must go on for her release.

International concern had intensified over the health and whereabouts of the Nobel peace prize winner since violence erupted on May 30 as she was touring a provincial town in the north. She has been in detention since then.

Envoy Razali Ismail met Suu Kyi for an hour at the junta's headquarters in Yangon.

At Yangon airport, as he was about to leave for Kuala Lumpur, Razali was asked by reporters about Suu Kyi's condition.

"No injuries," he said. "I can assure you she's well and in good spirits."

Before the meeting, Razali said the junta had yet to be persuaded to release Suu Kyi, adding he hoped to return "as soon as possible" to push for her freedom.

"Now we have to work for her

release...and to work for the national reconciliation to be back on track," the envoy said, referring to a stalled dialogue between the government and opposition which he brokered three years ago.

Diplomats told Reuters earlier they expected Suu Kyi to be returned to her lakeside residence in Yangon, where she has spent much of the past 14 years under house arrest.

Diplomatic pressure has mounted on the Myanmar government in recent days, with the United States, Britain and the European Union saying they were considering more trade and investment sanctions because of Suu Kyi's treatment.

Since May 30, the junta has kept Suu Kyi at undisclosed locations and confined leaders of her National League for Democracy (NLD) to their houses.

After her release from a spell of house arrest in May last year, Suu Kyi made a series of trips to the provinces to meet party workers and supporters.

Nine Jewish settlement outposts dismantled

Bush 'optimistic' about ME peace

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army early Tuesday dismantled nine West Bank settlement outposts out of a total 15 slated for removal, Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim announced.

"At this stage there are 15 wildcat outposts that must be dismantled, and nine have already been evacuated during the night," he told Israeli public television's first channel.

Five of the outposts in question are inhabited.

"That will continue, in line with developments on the ground," he added.

"That depends on what the Palestinians do. There are wildcat settlements that must be legalized."

"All Israeli governments have authorized settlements since June 1967," when the West Bank and Gaza Strip were conquered by

Israel, Boim said.

"If the political settlement process with the Palestinians makes progress, we must establish our borders in line with Israel's interests, and the settlements are a central element for setting these borders," he added.

The first evacuations sent a shockwave among the settlers, who vowed to fight the government, albeit only through legal means.

"The Settlers' Council announces the start of a struggle against the clearing of outposts, against the Middle East roadmap and the surrender to terror," the council said.

"We will carry on a determined, non-compromising but non-violent struggle until (Prime Minister Ariel Sharon) backs down," it added.

There are more than 100 settlement outposts in the West Bank.

More than 60 of them have been built since Sharon came to power in 2001 and are due to be dismantled under the terms of the roadmap, which Israel accepted.

Meanwhile, President George W. Bush said Monday that he was hopeful that the latest anti-Israel attacks by Palestinian hardliners would not sidetrack the "march to peace" in the Middle East.

"I'm optimistic that responsible leaders have now got the message that we must combine to work to fight off the terror attacks, so that a peaceful Palestinian state can emerge," he said.

Bush, who held his first summit last week with prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Mahmud Abbas, said both sides were committed to the so-called "road map" to peace, which calls for such a state as early as 2005.

Pakistan blames India for delaying talks

Jamali won't resign if peace bid fails

PTI, Islamabad

Accusing India for the delay in commencement of peace talks between the two countries, Pakistan on Monday said New Delhi should get its "act" together and "speak in one voice" to resume "unconditional" dialogue.

"The Indian leadership should put its act together and speak in one voice. We hear about the internal dissension about the normalisation of relations with Pakistan and that is worrying," Pakistan's new Foreign Office spokesman Masood Khan, who succeeds High Commissioner to India-designate Aziz Ahmad Khan, said.

Claiming that the Pakistani leadership has been "very constructive, forward looking and positive in their approach towards resumption of dialogue", he said, "Unfortunately, we haven't seen the same sort of tone from Indian leadership".

He also accused the Indian leadership of trying to introduce conditionalities before the commencement of talks.

"Lots of conditionalities are being introduced in the process that has been initiated. They are all coming from India. As far as we are concerned we are saying that no conditions."

Meanwhile, unlike Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who had declared that he would "retire" if he failed in his

fresh peace bid, his Pakistani counterpart Zafarullah Khan Jamali has said he would not resign as he believed in "trying again."

Jamali, in an interview to Khaleej Times published on Monday, said he would lead the Pakistani side at the summit talks with Vajpayee but would not resign if the parleys failed to resolve the Kashmir dispute, because he believed in trying again.

Asked if he will follow Vajpayee who had reportedly said he would resign if he fail to solve the Kashmir dispute, Jamali said "if Vajpayee had said so, that is his wish and will. It is entirely up to him. But in politics the political approach has to be taken into consideration".

'Saddam uncertainty fuels attacks in Iraq'

REUTERS, Lisbon

The United States has said its failure to find Saddam Hussein may be emboldening the fallen leader's Baath party supporters to attack US forces in Iraq.

The former Iraqi president has not been seen since the fall of the Iraqi capital Baghdad two months ago.

"It might give heart to the Baathists who may want to hope that they can take back that country, which they are not going to succeed in doing," Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld said late on Monday.

"We'll just keep looking for him. We'll find him," he told reporters on a flight to Portugal at the start of a four-day European visit that includes stops in Albania, Germany and Brussels for NATO meetings.

An American soldier, shot dead at a checkpoint near the Syrian border late on Sunday, was the latest killed in a spate of attacks on US troops since they toppled Saddam.

Since Baghdad fell on April 9, 39 US soldiers have been killed by

enemies and 41 in accidents, bringing total deaths in the Iraq campaign to 182.

Rumsfeld said the string of attacks on US forces was due to Saddam sympathizers in the north of the country who had not been engaged in as heavy battles as the south during the war.

"There is no one who thinks that it's a well-organized nationally directed campaign," he told reporters.

The soldier was killed late on Sunday when a vehicle drew up at a traffic checkpoint, and the occupants asked for medical help, US Central Command said in a statement.

Two people with pistols got out and shot the soldier. His comrades returned fire, killing one attacker and capturing a second. At least one other assailant fled in the vehicle.

US Central Command said on Tuesday that an explosion at an Iraqi ammunition facility south of Baghdad on Monday had killed three Iraqis and wounded two. No US troops were injured.

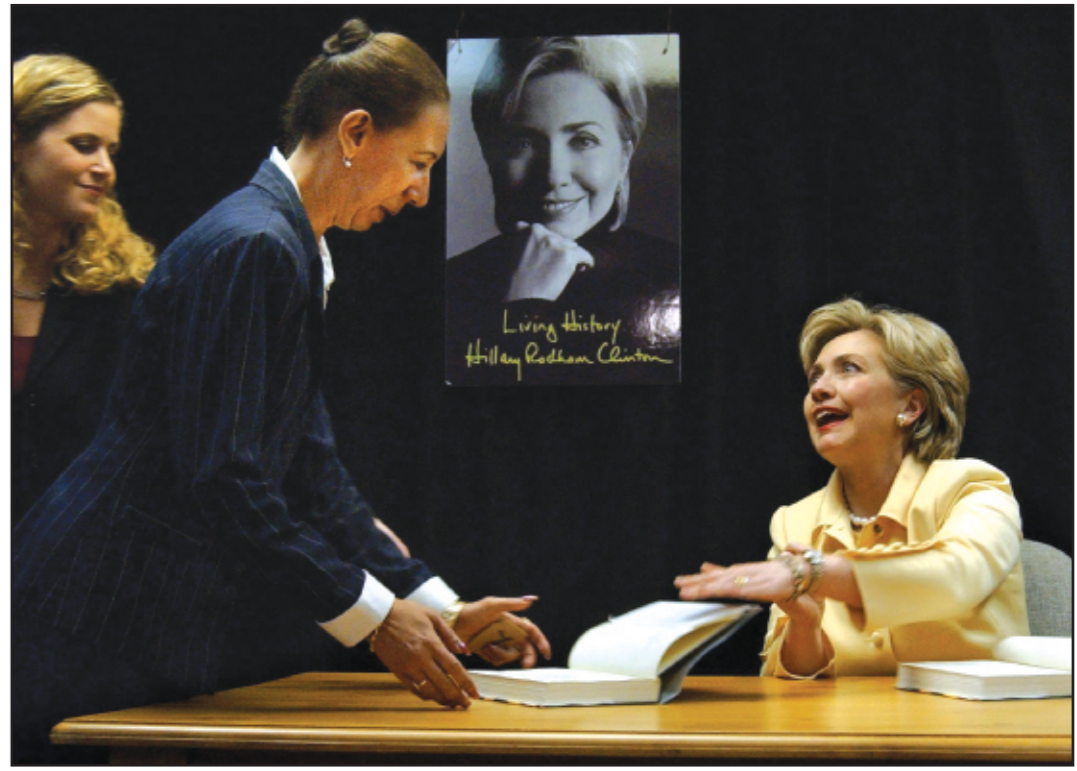


PHOTO: AFP
US Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (R), D-NY, greets a customer as she signs a copy of her memoir, "Living History" on Monday at a Barnes and Noble bookstore in New York. The former first lady officially launched her much-hyped memoir and said her husband was also busy pushing the book with its revelations about their marriage and Monica Lewinsky.



PHOTO: AFP
UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) scientists inspect on Tuesday the Tuwaitha nuclear plant, near Baghdad, where a team of seven is making an inventory of the nuclear material which was under its safeguard at the site before the war. Neighbours of Iraq's largest nuclear facility are worried that they may have been poisoned by post-war looting of the site, saying that looters emptied barrels from the facility and then resold them to unsuspecting locals who had been kept in the dark about Saddam Hussein's nuclear programme.

Donors end meet pledging \$ 4.5b for rebuilding Lanka

AFP, Tokyo

International donors wound up a two-day pledging conference here Tuesday by promising 4.5 billion dollars in aid over four years to help rebuild strife-torn Sri Lanka, Japan's special peace envoy said.

The amount includes one billion dollars each from Japan and the Asian Development Bank and 293 million dollars from the European Union (EU).

"This tangible contribution is a vote of confidence in Sri Lanka," said Japan's envoy Yasushi Akashi during the conference closing ceremony.

Sri Lanka Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said the aid pledged would "lay the foundation for realisation of our goal of a peaceful Sri Lanka in which all people

could live in harmony, peace and dignity."

In exchange for their support, donors will make periodic reviews of the progress of the peace process, they said in the final declaration.

"In view of the linkage between donor support and progress in the peace process, the international community will monitor and review the progress in the peace process," it said.

Full compliance with the ceasefire agreement, effective protection of human rights, and the conclusion of an agreement between the government and rebels on a verifiable "de-escalation, de-militarisation and normalisation process" are among the conditions for the release of the promised aid, the declaration said.

5-party talks to resolve DPRK nuke impasse

THE DAILY YOMIURI/ ANN, Tokyo

Five-party talks that will include Japan and South Korea will likely start in a month at the earliest in an attempt to make progress in finding a solution to problems raised by North Korea's nuclear weapons program, a visiting US official told the Japanese media Monday.

This means that similar talks initially conducted by the United States, China and North Korea in Beijing in April will be expanded to incorporate Japan and South Korea, according to the US official, who asked not to be identified.

The five-way talks are certain to exert greater international pressure on the reclusive state to give up its nuclear weapons program.

The regime ruled by Kim Jong Il

is not functioning well, the UN official said, citing the country's failed economic management.

The US official said the three-party talks came after Pyongyang made concessions to Washington and Beijing despite its initial objection to the formula. He also said that there were slight signs that North Korea was inclined to accept a proposal to expand the three-way talks to include Tokyo and Seoul.

In the past, North Korea has agreed to join multilateral talks if pressured to do so by China while Japan, the United States and South Korea acted in concert, the official said.

He concluded that North Korea would likely accept the expanded talks if Japan, the United States and South Korea adopted a strong

attitude toward the North during a meeting of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group in Hawaii on Thursday and Friday and if China conveyed that stance to Pyongyang.

Citing past cases involving North Korea, the official said the North was expected to agree to expand the three-party talks in one or two months, adding that the five-way talks would begin in August at the latest.

He also said that most agreement reached at bilateral negotiations had been broken by North Korea, emphasizing the importance of settling pertinent issues involving Pyongyang through multilateral dialogue.