

ASEAN pushes for Pak membership to ARF

AFP, Phnom Penh

ASEAN's decision to push for Pakistan's inclusion in Asia-Pacific's top security grouping, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), will boost moves against terrorism and towards resolving the India-Pakistan dispute, officials said Tuesday.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which set up the ARF a decade ago, decided late Monday to lift the forum's moratorium on new members and push for Pakistan to become its 24th member.

Fearing the move could open the floodgates for membership, it was decided that other long-standing applicants -- including East Timor, Iran and Sri Lanka -- be considered on a case-by-case basis, officials said.

Wednesday's annual meeting of the ARF, of which Pakistan's archival India is a member, is expected to accept Pakistan's membership by

consensus, they said.

Diplomats said India might object to Pakistan's inclusion even though Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee recently offered to resolve the nuclear rivals' longstanding dispute over Kashmir at the peace table.

Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both, has caused two of the three wars between the rival neighbours since they gained independence from Britain in 1947.

"By bringing in Pakistan, the ARF will provide an important forum for Pakistan and India to discuss a regional flashpoint, Kashmir," ASEAN's head of external relations Sundram Pushpanathan told AFP.

He said while the move would give a higher profile to the ARF as a mechanism to resolve the India-Pakistan dispute, "more importantly we must see Pakistan's inclusion as an initiative by ASEAN to bring counter-terrorism to the fore."

"With the imminent terrorism

threat, you cannot leave out Pakistan, who is an important player in addressing the issue in the region. You have to bring them on board."

Southeast Asia's principal terrorism concern is with regional terror network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the regional chapter of the al-Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden.

Pakistan is viewed as a key ally by Washington in the campaign against international terrorism following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States blamed on al-Qaeda.

Pakistan, which nurtured and supported the harsh Taliban regime in Afghanistan until September 2001, has been accused of allowing fugitive Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists to hide in its border region, prompting angry denials from Islamabad.

Diplomatic sources told AFP that ASEAN could seek US support to lobby India not to object to Pakistan's inclusion in the ARF.

Relations between India and the United States, which imposed sanctions on country after it tested nuclear weapons in May 1998, have improved considerably since New Delhi joined the US-led "coalition against terrorism" following the September 11 attacks.

The ASEAN move to include Pakistan was led by Malaysia and received quick support from other Muslim nations Indonesia and Brunei, as well as ASEAN members Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, officials said.

An ASEAN diplomat said the grouping had forged an "excellent relationship with India in recent years," capped with the introduction of annual talks between the Southeast Asian leaders and India's Vajpayee last year.

"I don't think India will want to throw the spanner into the works at this juncture and spoil Pakistan's chances of entering the ARF," he said.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian fisherman looks at floodwaters from a partially submerged railway line in Kakuri Ahomgaon, some 390km from Guwahati on Monday. At least 400,000 people have been left homeless in India's northeastern state of Assam by flash floods triggered by heavy monsoon rains.

Red Cross can meet detainees: Myanmar

REUTERS, Yangon

The International Committee of the Red Cross will be allowed to visit Myanmar's detained opposition members, rounded up last month along with pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, the junta said on Tuesday.

The announcement comes amid mounting international pressure on the ruling military to release Suu Kyi and her followers, held since a bloody May 30 clash between pro-junta groups and her supporters. "The ICRC has been granted access to those who were picked up for questioning about the events on May 30," an official from the junta spokesman's office told Reuters.

He said the detainees included Tin Oo, vice chairman of Suu Kyi's

National League for Democracy (NLD), thought to be held in a jail hundreds of miles northwest of Yangon.

The NLD swept to a landslide election victory in 1990 but was never allowed to rule.

Rumors had circulated after May 30 that Tin Oo had been killed, but family members have said they recently received a handwritten letter from him through authorities asking for medication he regularly takes.

The junta official declined to say if the ICRC would have access to Suu Kyi, who turns 58 on Thursday and was visited by a top U.N. envoy last week. But an ICRC official said they were pushing for access to all those held.

"We've been given access, but

we don't know if that includes Suu Kyi. We are invited to a meeting with officials tomorrow and hope to find out more," ICRC representative Michel Ducreaux told Reuters in Yangon.

Suu Kyi is believed to be held in a government guesthouse in the capital Yangon. NLD sources and family members of those detained said they had been told many of those rounded up were in a jail in Kalay, about 600 miles northwest of Yangon.

Suu Kyi and some two dozen senior members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) were detained on May 30 following violence in a town north of Yangon near Mandalay.

Kanchi Seer sends new proposals to Muslim Board

PTI, Lucknow

In a fresh bid to resolve the Ayodhya tangle, Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati has sent new proposals to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB).

"Though the Kanchi Seer's formula has not yet reached us, we have been told by sources close to the seer that the formula is on its way," AIMPLB Vice President and noted Shia cleric Maulana Kalbe Sadiq told in Lucknow on Tuesday. "The proposals of the seer have been sent by courier and are likely to reach us within a day or two," he said.

The Shia leader said he had sought postponement of the meeting of the Babri panel scheduled to be held in New Delhi on June 21 to enable the Board members to go through the proposals.

LoC is the problem, not solution: Musharraf

PTI, Islamabad

Ruling out chances of accepting the Line of Control as international border in a compromise deal to resolve the Kashmir issue, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said that this country would talk on all issues with India but was not ready to sideline this "core issue".

"LoC is the problem and can not be a solution," he told mediapersons here late Monday night before leaving for Britain on a four-nation tour. He would later go to the US, Germany and France.

Earlier, Musharraf, in an interview to Geo TV, said Pakistan was willing to talk with India on all issues but at the same time would not sideline Kashmir. "There is no doubt that Kashmir

is still the core issue between India and Pakistan," he said, but stressed Pakistan and India could make significant headway in their talks to resolve all bilateral issues including the vexed Kashmir issue.

Expressing satisfaction over some "positive statements" made by Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani on the desire to resolve the Kashmir issue, Musharraf said his visit to US was not linked to the Indian leader's recent trip to the country.

He said during his visit to United States, both sides will hold talks on bilateral matters and regional situation including Kashmir, Afghanistan and Middle East.

Saying that Pakistan had been asked to send its troops for deployment in Iraq, the President said so far no final decision had been taken

on the issue. "Before taking any decision on this issue, Pakistan would look into its modalities, ground realities, financial implications and cover by United Nations and Islamic countries," Musharraf said.

The President said Pakistan is also closely watching other Islamic countries on whether they were sending their troops to Iraq.

Stating that al-Qaeda terror network "had lost its backbone and most of its leadership is arrested except some second or third string leadership," he said "we are operating against them (al-Qaeda). I cannot say with guarantee where they are. In my view they are in small numbers but they are all on the run".

WHO sees SARS battle unfinished

THE STAR/ ANN, Kuala Lumpur

The World Health Organization said Tuesday that SARS had diminished as a global threat and praised China for showing greater transparency and a "strong political commitment" in combating the disease.

However, delegates at an international SARS conference in Kuala Lumpur warned countries to remain vigilant of new infectious diseases.

The WHO also said it would not lift advisories warning against travel to Beijing and Taiwan until their SARS outbreaks are further contained.

"The global epidemic is now coming under control, but we must continue the fight against the disease nationally and internationally until the end," Shigeru Omi, WHO director for the Western Pacific region, told more than 1,000 scientists, government officials and health experts.



PHOTO: AFP

WWII fighter aircraft are displayed on Monday at the Bourget Air Show outside Paris, France.

India, Laos sign agreement on science and technology

AFP, New Delhi

India and Laos Monday signed a cooperation agreement on science and technology during the visit of the Lao Prime Minister Boungnang Vorachit to New Delhi.

Boungnang also held wide-ranging talks with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee during which they underlined the importance of enhancing trade cooperation.

He was earlier on Monday given a formal welcome at the start of a week-long visit here aimed at strengthening ties between the two countries, an Indian official said.

Boungnang, who arrived here on Sunday, said his talks with Indian leaders would focus on augmenting bilateral cooperation.

Talking to reporters in the forecourt of the presidential palace after the welcoming ceremony, Boungnang said: "I thank India for the immense assistance and support given for the development of my country," the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

BJP meets to discuss 'Mission 2004'

PTI, Mumbai

The main focus of the four-day brainstorming session of the BJP beginning here on Tuesday night would be 'Mission 2004', to chalk out a strategy for getting a clear majority in the Lok Sabha for the party and a two-thirds majority for the NDA.

"The meeting which is aimed at strengthening the party structure as also that of its allies will discuss the broad strategy for the 2004 Lok Sabha polls," party spokesman Pramod Mahajan told reporters here.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who left Delhi for Mumbai on Tuesday, would deliver the inaugural address while Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani, who is currently away in London would join the session on June 19.

Issues like the timing of the general elections, any changes in the Vajpayee government and electoral alliances are not part of the agenda of the meet, Mahajan said while not ruling out the

possibility of some leaders referring to these issues.

The session is not expected to adopt any resolution as it would be more in the nature of exchange of ideas among the party's top brass, he said.

RSS leader Madan Das Devi, who is in charge of Sangh Parivar outfit's relations with BJP, is attending the meeting.

Mahajan said even though BJP aimed at getting a majority of its own, it would go along with its NDA allies and continue with the coalition.

"Even though our aim is to get a clear majority for the BJP, we would like to get a two-thirds majority for the NDA in the Lok Sabha elections," he said.

The brainstorming session, which is more in the nature of exchange of ideas among the top leadership of the BJP, would be focusing on how the BJP can strengthen the party at different levels.

Mahajan said party President M Venkaiah Naidu would chair the meeting.

Arroyo asks Moro rebels to get serious on peace or risk oblivion

AFP, Manila

President Gloria Arroyo on Tuesday told Moro separatists in the southern Philippines to get serious about peace talks or risk being sidelined into irrelevance.

Arroyo's comments followed a Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) announcement on Monday rejecting her demand that its leader Salamat Hashim become chief negotiator in proposed peace talks sponsored by neighboring Malaysia.

The 12,500-member MILF, which has been waging a low-level guerrilla war for secession for a quarter century, "must shed off its temporizing gestures and take a bold step forward or suffer a continuing slide into irrelevance or obsolescence," Arroyo said in a statement.

"The use of force to gain political ends is already passe in the civilized world," the president said, noting that there was "mounting clamor of the people and the world Islamic community for peace."

'Aceh operation could last 5 more months'

AFP, Banda Aceh

A major Indonesian military assault on separatist rebels in Aceh province could continue for five more months, the army and armed forces chiefs said Tuesday.

"Within less than five months there should already be a drastic change in Aceh. There should be a change towards a better situation every day," army chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu told troops who arrived in Aceh Monday to join the country's biggest military operation for a quarter-century.

Ryacudu urged some 400 members of the elite strategic reserve Kostrad to keep up the pressure on Free Aceh Movement (GAM) fighters and not give them a chance to regroup.

The government imposed a six-month state of martial law and launched the military operation on May 19, hours after peace talks broke down in Tokyo.

Armed forces commander General Endriartono Sutarto said in Jakarta it would take more than six months to eradicate GAM.

North Korea warns US, Japan against blockade

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea vowed on Tuesday to meet any US-led blockade on the communist state with "limitless" retaliation, saying the flames of war would immediately spread to Japan.

Isolated North Korea is facing deepening international ostracism and mounting pressure from the United States and its allies over its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The nuclear crisis has also thrown a spotlight on North Korea's trade in arms and illegal drugs, prompting plans by the United States and its allies to curb such traffic.

US and South Korean officials say any policing action would merely enforce existing laws and not represent sanctions or a blockade. A quarantine would not work without the help of China and Russia, which share borders with North Korea, experts say.

But North Korea's official Rodong Sinmun daily said the moves were part of a premeditated war plan.

"The DPRK will take an immediate physical retaliatory step against the US once it judges that its sovereignty is infringed upon by Washington's blockade operation," said the newspaper in a commentary carried by the North's KCNA news agency.

DPRK is the acronym for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korea's official title. "Nobody can vouch that this blockade operation will not lead to such a serious development as an all-out war," it said.

The United States and its allies say Pyongyang is exporting narcotics, counterfeit money and missile technology to help fund its nuclear weapons program and prop up its ailing economy.

In a meeting with South Korea

and Japan in Hawaii at the weekend, the United States won support for efforts to clamp down on North Korean contraband.

Eleven countries including the United States agreed to join forces to find a way to block North Korean ships suspected of carrying drugs, counterfeit money or materials for weapons of mass destruction at a meeting in Madrid last week.

North Korea has rejected the trafficking allegations as groundless and part of US attempts to undermine Pyongyang in its stand-off with Washington over its nuclear weapons ambitions.

The ruling Workers Party organ added an explicit warning to Japan, a main market for smuggled North Korean stimulants. Tokyo has stepped up inspections of visiting North Korean ships on suspicion the vessels carry drugs and intelligence agents.

'US, UK helped lower temperature in S Asia'

PTI, Washington

Stressing that the United States had "nuclear flashpoint concerns" with India and Pakistan, American Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has said that US and British efforts have helped in "lowering of temperature" in the region.

"The British and the US governments spent a lot of our time and energy trying to lower the temperature. I think that we have been successful but more importantly the governments in Islamabad and in New Delhi have decided to reason their way through these problems," Armitage said in an interview released by the State Department on Tuesday.

When asked which region US found more "menacing" North Korea or Indo-Pakistan-Armitage replied, "we have to resolve both of them at the same time. We have no

choice."

"The fact of the matter is we have nuclear concerns in the North Korea. We also have a nuclear flashpoint concerns with India and Pakistan and we have real terrorism concerns in Afghanistan," he said, adding "we cannot choose between them".

Warning that "it would not be good policy to try to pick one over the other," Armitage said "if you make a choice you perhaps condemn one of the region to bad fate".

Conceding that it was difficult to concentrate on North Korea, South Asia and Iraq at the same time, Armitage, who gave the interview in Tokyo last week, expressed confidence that the Bush administration was equipped to deal with the situation as it considered Asia "vitaly important".



PHOTO: AFP

People wait for their turn to get water standing in a long queue with their jerrycans in Karachi on Monday. The city is faced with an acute water shortage while being under a severe heatwave causing lots of sufferings for the thousands of its citizen.