

Delhi-Lahore bus service delayed due to snags

PTI, Islamabad

Promising to act soon on the new Indian proposal to hold technical discussions to resume air links, Pakistan on Tuesday said that the much awaited resumption of the bus services between two countries was likely to be delayed till August and cited visa and security issues as causes of the delay.

The Lahore-Delhi Bus Service, that was expected to be launched from July 1 has been delayed due to non-resolution of technical details including the issuance of visas to the passengers by Pakistan and India, Minister in-charge for Culture and Tourism, Rais Munir Ahmad said.

He told reporters in Islamabad that recent talks between Indian and Pakistan officials in New Delhi to resume bus services were highly successful but several technical details, including issuance of visas needed to be sorted out between the two countries. In view of this the service could either be resumed in July or in August, Ahmad said.

He said the Indian side was informed that as far as the technical aspects were concerned, Pakistan would be able to meet the deadline but in the absence of visa facilities it would not be proper to announce the resumption of date at the moment.

Indian media hail new pact with China

Decision on Tibet a betrayal, feels Indians

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian media Wednesday lauded a slew of agreements, including a joint declaration and another on border trade, reached between Asian giants India and China, hailing them as a "triumph for pragmatism."

In an editorial, the Hindu newspaper said the decision by both sides to launch an initiative to "break the impasse over the boundary dispute" should boost bilateral ties. The paper described the initiative as the "centrepiece" of the Beijing declaration and said it was "both acknowledgement of the year-long deadlock over exchange of boundary maps and the political resolve to end it at the earliest."

Ties between the world's two most populous countries have for decades been plagued by tensions over issues such as Tibet and their mutual borders, with the two countries fighting a bitter border conflict in 1962 and tension flaring again in 1986.

Noting that this was the first joint declaration to be released by the two countries, the Hindu paper said it gave "the seal of formal approval to the pragmatism and proven step-by-step approach to problem solving."

The declaration and the memorandum of understanding on border trade "has the potential to end a long period of mutual suspicion," it added.

A striking aspect of the evolving relationship "is the conscious decision to anchor bilateral relations to economics through greater trade and investments," the editorial noted.

This view was echoed by an editorial in the Hindustan Times which noted that "an emphasis on trade" had marked Vajpayee's China visit.

This was reflected in an agreement to allow trade through the ancient Nathu La pass in India's northeastern state of Sikkim into Tibet, the Hindustan Times said.

Times News Network reports

that India's decision to recognise Tibet as part of China has evoked strong reactions from timesofindia.com readers. While some termed it as "simply horrifying," one reader called it "total stupidity".

According to many readers, the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had finally gone and sold even the "semblance of integrity and worthiness that we possessed". "Are we going to drive out the Dalai Lama and the Rinpoches from the country to please China? One reader asked.

"China has trespassed into Tibet and taken over the land that belonged to the Tibetans. While we pride ourselves on being free and independent, we now take away from the Tibetans who have entrusted themselves into our hands, their right to even demand freedom. Let's now just wait in the stands and watch as the Tibetans in India move to other places as refugees and the Dalai Lama moves on to a country that offers him the

dignity to see his peace process through," wrote one incensed reader.

Another reader wrote, "Shame! India has betrayed the Tibetans! For years, they looked to us as friends. It hurts all the more when a friend betrays you. Generations of Tibetans suffered beatings, mutilation, poisoning, electric shocks, executions, and many more unspeakable torments. All that wouldn't have hurt as much as it would now."

However, another reader opined, "Definitely shifting from principle adopted for a long time is not an easy decision. But in the context of rapidly changing global landscape, if you can't walk in same pace, your presence will be irrelevant. Considering all these factors, we should take few calculated moves. But how much benefit we get out of all these exercises is to be found out. Just for the sake of improving relationship with big power, we can't keep our identity at stake."



PHOTO: REUTERS

Iraqi's standing on a bridge look at British army vehicle June 25, 2003 that was damaged and burnt after trouble erupted yesterday in Amarah, some 200 km (120 miles) north of Iraq's British-controlled second city, Basra. Six British troops were killed and eight were wounded in Iraq on Tuesday in the worst single death toll sustained by US and British forces since March 23, three days after they went to war to topple Saddam Hussein.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Activists from the "Council for Tibet Freedom" burn pictures of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and China's President Hu Jintao and a Chinese national flag during a demonstration in the central Indian city of Bhopal June 25, 2003. Tibetan exiles in India believe improved relations between India and China would help negotiations between the Dalai Lama and Beijing over Tibet, a Tibetan spokesman said.

Indian army launches massive crackdown on ULFA

AFP, Guwahati

The Indian army launched a massive crackdown on 100 ULFA rebels holed up inside a thick forest in eastern Assam's Lakhimpur area, officials said on Wednesday.

An army spokesman said the offensive began on Tuesday and was aimed at flushing out the outlawed rebels.

"This is perhaps the biggest ever single counter-insurgency operation in Assam in the past decade," an army commander told AFP requesting anonymity.

Intelligence reports say a large group of heavily-armed ULFA rebels have entered Assam from their bases in the neighbouring kingdom of Bhutan to carry out hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on federal soldiers.

"More than 1,000 army, police, and paramilitary commandos have started combing the forest, supported by helicopters carrying out aerial surveillance of the area to prevent the ULFA militants from escaping," a senior Assam police official said.

"If required, air raids will be launched on the ULFA bases inside Lakhimpur," the army commander added.

"We are confident the ULFA

militants cannot escape the forest with our troops blocking all entry and exit routes."

Lakhimpur was previously the ULFA headquarters but the militants were forced to abandon the forests after an Indian army offensive in 1990 code named Operation Bajrang.

On Monday, nine soldiers were injured in an ambush in eastern Assam by the ULFA, while ULFA attacked an oil installation in the area with rocket propelled grenades, besides killing two paramilitary soldiers.

The ULFA, fighting for an independent homeland in Assam, has warned of more attacks on federal troops in the state.

"Recently we have seen the Indian army killing some of our cadres like cats and dogs. We cannot remain silent and will launch counter-attacks with full vigour," ULFA commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah was quoted as saying by vernacular Assamese language newspapers Wednesday.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.

'Breakaway foam caused Columbia disaster'

PTI, Washington

In a first ever public admission, investigators probing the Columbia space disaster on Wednesday blamed the breakaway foam as "the most probable cause" for the disintegration of the spacecraft that killed all seven astronauts on board.

"It is a pretty compelling story that in fact the foam is the most probable cause of the shuttle accident," Roger Tetrault, member of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board said after examining closely several pieces of the shuttle wreckage.

Tetrault believes that the fatal breach in the shuttle's left wing, which was struck by insulation foam just 82 seconds after lift-off on January 16 this year resulted in the spacecraft's disintegration on February 1.

US orders security overhaul at nuke sites

AFP, Washington

US Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham ordered late on Tuesday an "overhaul" of security at the nation's nuclear weapons laboratories, following charges his department might not be doing enough to prevent terrorists from getting hold of materials needed to build a "dirty bomb."

"The Department of Energy views security as the critical responsibility of the national laboratories, and we treat any lapse or failure as significant," Abraham said in a brief statement.

He said he had directed Linton Brooks, head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, to launch "a comprehensive security overhaul" at the national labs and to put in place any immediate changes he deemed necessary.

Troops faced problems disarming Iraqis: Blair

REUTERS, London

Six British troops killed in Iraq may have run into trouble as they tried to disarm the local population, Prime Minister Tony Blair said on Wednesday.

"There is a background to do with the attempts by British forces to make sure the local population, who regularly carry machine guns and small firearms, were disarmed of those weapons," Blair told parliament.

"There had been problems in relation to that. That may form part of the background to it but at the moment it's simply too early to say."

Local residents have said Iraqi civilians shot dead the six soldiers and wounded eight others during clashes on Tuesday over intrusive arms searches.

But a British military spokesman, Ronnie McCourt, said the killing of the military police officers in the southern town of Majjar was unprovoked murder. Witnesses and residents said four Iraqis were killed and 14 wounded in the clashes with the British soldiers in Majjar, 18 miles south of the city of al Amarah.

The clashes followed resentment over weapons searches by British soldiers and erupted after

troops fired plastic bullets to try to control thousands of protesters, they said.

Blair said that within 24 hours, he expected to be able to say more about the group that attacked the forces. Earlier, his spokesman said he did not recognize such a portrayal of British forces' actions or "rumors being bandied around."

Blair said there was no question of Britain turning its back on Iraq, despite the losses.

More British troops would be sent to Iraq if needed, he added but said local commanders believed they had enough forces.

Kumaratunga accuses LTTE of planning war

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president Chandrika Kumaratunga accused LTTE rebels on Wednesday of getting ready for war, which she said would catch the government unprepared.

The accusation comes as the Tigers say they are close to returning to peace talks they suspended two months ago, because of what they said was a lack of rebuilding of Tamil areas ravaged by 20 years of conflict.

"The LTTE is once again preparing for war," presidential spokesman Harim Peiris said, referring to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which signed a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire with the government in February 2002.

Peiris said recent events, including the murders of military informants and continued recruitment by the Tigers, was similar to what happened when the rebels broke the last truce in 1995.

Afghan president orders release of journalists

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai Wednesday ordered the release of two journalists arrested last week for publishing an article allegedly blasphemous to Islam, the national faith of Afghanistan.

"Now I have instructed the release of the two journalists pending their case in the court and let them go and defend themselves in the court of law in accordance with the laws of the country," Karzai told a radio broadcast.

The two were released Wednesday.

Sayed Mirhassan Mahdawi, editor of the Aftab ("Sun") weekly, and his Iranian deputy Ali Payam

Sestani were arrested last Tuesday for publishing an article deemed offensive to Islam, contravening the country's press law. Aftab was also closed down.

The supreme court had called an article headlined "Holy Fascism" an "offence to Islam" and asked for the low-circulation paper to be closed down and its editor prosecuted.

Karzai said he had ordered an investigation and defended the detention of the two since their arrest.

"The attorney general wrote to me of what had happened and asked for permission for an investigation and I instructed that these people be investigated," he said.

"And the investigation requires

that those who are investigated for certain violation of laws must be detained for three days. After that we kept them in protective custody because there are lots of bad people around, miscreants who would like to use this issue to cause a lot of trouble," he said.

Karzai said the current 1964 constitution and press law provided for freedom of speech "but that freedom of expression must not violate the religious beliefs of the Afghan people or the national interests of the Afghan people."

"Unfortunately the article which was written by Aftab created doubts about that by the way the language was used to express their opinions," he said.

Bush rewards Musharraf with aid package

REUTERS, Camp David

US President Bush on Tuesday proposed a \$3 billion aid package to Pakistan for its help in the US-led war on terrorism, but did not offer the fighter jets long sought by Islamabad.

"Greater economic development is ... critical to fulfilling the hopes of the Pakistani people," Bush told a news conference with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf at the Camp David presidential retreat in the Maryland mountains.

In their private talks, Bush put pressure on Musharraf to move toward democracy and stop militant extremists from launching attacks on neighbouring Afghanistan from Pakistan, a senior US official said.

Musharraf said al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden may be moving

between Afghanistan and Pakistan in a "treacherous" border area.

Bush said the leadership of al Qaeda was being dismantled slowly but surely. "It could take a day, or it could take a month, it could take years."

Bush pressured Musharraf to halt any Pakistani proliferation of nuclear or missile technology to North Korea or elsewhere. Musharraf pledged to do nothing that would cause Washington concern, the U.S. official said.

At the news conference, Bush praised Musharraf's leadership in fighting al Qaeda and in helping ease tensions with India over the disputed Kashmir region.

Musharraf told ABC television that he and Bush also discussed the possibility of Pakistani troops going to Iraq. He said Pakistan could

provide up to 10,000 troops but certain issues needed to be resolved first.

"One of the issues is certainly the financial package because it wouldn't be fair to expect Pakistan itself to finance such a large force," Musharraf said in an interview taped for broadcast on ABC's "Nightline."

But Bush stopped short of giving Musharraf everything he asked for. He said he would work with the US Congress on a five-year, \$3 billion assistance package "to help advance security and economic opportunity for Pakistan's citizens." Half that money would be used for defence equipment and security.

Bush said Musharraf pressed unsuccessfully for the sale of F-16 planes. The United States is wary of feeding an arms race in the region.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (right) and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh (left) stand alongside Russia's President Putin and his wife, Lyudmila, before a state banquet at Buckingham Palace, Tuesday night. Earlier, Mr Putin, who is on the first state visit by a Russian leader since 1874 when Tsar Alexander II came to Britain, had been delayed by 15 minutes after his motorcade was delayed by heavy traffic as it travelled from London's Heathrow Airport to Horse Guards Parade for the official welcoming ceremony.