

Musharraf extends olive branch to Vajpayee

India rejects idea of Kashmir 'roadmap'

AFP, Washington

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Wednesday offered to embrace Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as a "partner in a historic peace process," calling for dialogue to end seething tensions in South Asia.

Musharraf, a day after meeting President George W. Bush at Camp David, said he was encouraged by moves by Vajpayee to defuse the most recent drama between the two rivals, but warned that Pakistan would not be intimidated or bow to Indian pressure.

"India-Pakistan relations are at last showing some prospect of

movement," Musharraf said in a keynote address to the US Institute for Peace.

"But whether we shall be able to avail of this prospect is as yet a matter of cautious hope," he said, arguing the dispute over the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir was the core issue that needed to be tackled.

"We are not talking -- we need to talk -- we don't even play cricket!" he said, using the bully pulpit of his visit to Washington to seek advantage in Islamabad's diplomatic game with New Delhi.

Pakistan and India have in recent months both taken confidence building measures including a

planned exchange of diplomats and resumption of transport links, designed to ease the way to dialogue following a 17-month show-down which sparked fears of the world's first nuclear war.

But Musharraf, who also praised behind-the-scenes US efforts to ease South Asian tensions, said India would have to make concessions on Kashmir for peace to come within reach.

New Delhi accuses Pakistan of fomenting an uprising in its portion of Kashmir and of permitting militants to cross the Line of Control (LoC) in what it says is an example of state sponsored terrorism.

Pakistan has called for outside

mediation of the dispute -- an idea India rejects.

PTI adds: India on Thursday rejected Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's suggestion for a US-sponsored roadmap on the lines of West Asia to resolve the Kashmir issue, saying there was no place for third party mediation.

"We have repeatedly said there is no third party role in the bilateral dialogue. There is no space for a third party at the table," External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said.

He told NDTV that issues between India and Pakistan have to be resolved bilaterally.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) meets with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf (L) at the Four Seasons Hotel on Wednesday in Washington, DC. US President George W. Bush has pledged to work with Congress on a conditional three-billion-dollar economic and military aid package for anti-terror ally Pakistan.

43 feared dead after bus plunges into Indian river

AFP, Bhopal

At least 43 people were feared dead after a bus plunged from a narrow bridge into a fast-flowing river in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, police said Thursday.

Police superintendent Yogesh Deshmukh, who is coordinating rescue work in Mandsaur district where the bus fell into the Retam river on Wednesday, told AFP by telephone that divers had only fished out seven survivors so far.

"There were 50 people travelling on the bus when it was pushed off the narrow bridge by the force of rising water," said Deshmukh.

"A dyke has been breached along the Retam river and is forcing water levels to dangerous levels. Water pressure literally knocked the bus off the bridge into the Retam river when it was making the crossing," he added.

NPA rebels raid Philippine town: 17 killed

THE INQUIRER/ ANN, Manila

Sixteen government troops and one civilian were killed when New Peoples Army rebels attacked a military detachment in Samar town before dawn Thursday, military officials said.

An Agence France-Presse report said around 200 NPA rebels raided the 52nd Infantry Battalion near the town of Oras in Samar province, about 550 km southeast of Manila.

Among the dead were five soldiers and eleven members of the Civilian Active Auxilliary (CAA), and one woman, reportedly a wife of one of the soldiers, according to reports reaching Camp Aguinaldo.

Two other soldiers were wounded, according to Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Lucero, public information officer of the Armed Forces.

The attack by the New People's Army (NPA) was the second major action launched by the rebels this week, the military said.

China steps closer to SARS vaccine

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

Chinese scientists have made another breakthrough in the creation of a SARS vaccine, as antibodies against the virus have been discovered in monkeys after they had been injected with inactive versions of the vaccine. But more time is still needed before scientists can conduct testing of the inactivated vaccine on humans and subsequently put it into clinical use.

"We have made breakthroughs in testing animals with inactivated vaccine and antibodies have been found after their inoculation," explained Huang Peitang, deputy head of the Key Science and Technology Group under the National Task Force for SARS Control and Prevention at a press conference Wednesday.

Dozens of scientists in two project groups are working around-the-clock testing animals with the inactivated vaccine. Antibodies have since been uncovered in 35 monkeys.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) shakes hands with Han Zheng, Shanghai's Mayor (R) as Indian Foreign Minister Jashwant Sinha looks on during a forum about "India and China: Challenge and Opportunities in IT sector" in Shanghai on Thursday. China and India are home to two of the fastest growing developing economies, and recognise the scope of exploiting each other's strengths.

Vajpayee a man of peace: China

IANS, Shanghai

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's growing reputation as a "man of peace," who has been seeking to mend fences with neighbours, has followed him right through this visit to China.

It was mentioned by Premier Wen Jiabao during talks in Beijing soon after Vajpayee's arrival and the refrain was taken up by all the Chinese leaders who he met the next day, including President Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, chairman of the Central Military Commission.

All these leaders lauded his peace initiative with Pakistan in their conversations and its potential impact for regional stability and international peace.

The tenor of talks with the Chinese has left Vajpayee "quite satisfied," according to an aide. When a correspondent asked him, after he inaugurated a Sino-Indian business seminar in Beijing, if he was happy with the outcome of talks with Chinese leaders, Vajpayee beamed and asked: "Do I look unhappy?"

Lanka seeks British peace expertise

Colombo makes fresh offer to revive talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has sought legal expertise from Britain for constitutional reforms aimed at politically ending the island's drawn-out ethnic conflict, a senior minister said Thursday.

Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris said he held talks with Britain's new secretary of state for constitutional affairs, Lord Falconer of Thoroton, earlier this week in London.

"We discussed legal issues of setting up an interim administrative mechanism and indeed the final political settlement," Peiris said, adding that he was also joined by Sri Lanka's Attorney General K.C. Kamaladasan.

Peiris said the government was also getting help from academics at

Oxford and Cambridge universities in the preparation of constitutional reforms.

Sri Lanka's peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels have been deadlocked since April over guerrilla demands for an interim administrative council with political and financial powers ahead of a final peace deal.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka was making a fresh offer of unspecified political and financial powers to Tamil Tiger rebels in a bid to end the deadlock in peace talks, the government's top negotiator said Thursday.

G.L. Peiris, who is also the constitutional affairs minister, said a draft proposal for a "provisional administrative structure" would be sent to the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) within two

weeks.

"What we are sending is not a final document, but something that explains the basic substance of a provisional administrative structure," Peiris said. "After taking inputs from the LTTE we will decide on a final document."

The peace process ran into trouble when the LTTE announced on April 21 that it was suspending participation in negotiations to protest what it called the government's failure to deliver on promises made at six rounds of talks.

The Tigers are demanding greater political and financial powers in the island's embattled northern and eastern areas as a precondition to return to the negotiating table.

Revolt in Kolkata Trinamul Cong rank & file

SAKYASEN MITRA, Kolkata

A huge revolt has taken place in the rank and file of the Trinamul Congress in Kolkata. The situation has turned so bad, that Mamata Banerjee is being forced to rush back to Kolkata today from Delhi. Two Trinamool members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly have written a letter to all the other Trinamool MLAs criticising Banerjee's decision to boycott the Budget session of the Assembly.

It should be mentioned here that before the last Panchayat polls, Banerjee had instructed all the MLAs of her party to boycott the Assembly and the allowances provided by the government. It was to be a mark of protest against the "reign of terror" created by the CPIM.

Pakistan asks US to hit root cause of terrorism

Bush must remove impression of Islam being targeted

PTI, Washington

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has asked United States to attack the root cause of terrorism instead of merely taking action against certain groups giving an impression in the Muslim world that Islam was being targeted.

"I will frankly admit, there are many misgivings in Pakistan about the justification and the utility of our cooperation with the US," he said in a speech to the US Institute of Peace on Wednesday.

Musharraf said this was due to the perception that symptoms rather than root cause of terror and extremism are being addressed and that unjust situations in which Muslim peoples are victims of state terror are being ignored.

"The Muslim world has started thinking that their religion Islam is being targeted. On the other side, the non-Muslim world, the West and the US, has started perceiving Islam to be a religion of terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism, intolerance.

Musharraf, who reiterated Pakistan's commitment to rooting out terrorism in all its forms, said there were people in his country who were yet to be convinced of the wisdom of siding with Washington.

He said "I sincerely believe that if the Middle East and South Asia peace process can develop credibility, the very negative Muslim perceptions arising from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will become much less so."

Expressing his reservations over the increased scrutiny of Pakistani

students by US authorities following the Sep 11 attack, Musharraf said it had sowed anti-American feeling among the citizens and students hesitate to come here for fear of harassment.

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PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani troops position a cannon in Anargi village bordering Afghanistan on Wednesday. Pakistani troops have secured almost all passes in a sensitive northwestern tribal region on the border with Afghanistan to block infiltration of al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives, following clashes with a small pocket of resistance, government and military officials said.

US to freeze assets of Myanmar leaders, ban remittances

AFP, Washington

Washington is preparing new sanctions against Myanmar that would freeze personal assets of members of its ruling military junta and ban remittances from its nationals working in the United States, a senior administration official said.

The proposed measures, announced Wednesday by US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, are part of efforts by the administration of President George W. Bush to step up pressure on Myanmar's ruling junta and bring about the release of jailed pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We are preparing an executive order for the president to freeze the assets of (junta) members, and ban remittances to Burma from the United States," Kelly told members of the House Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific. "We are supportive of legislation that would place restrictions on travel-related transactions."

He did not elaborate, and White House and State Department officials were unable to say when the order will be signed.

Members of Myanmar's military regime insist Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, was put under temporary "protective custody" at an undisclosed location

after May 30 clashes, which broke out when she and her supporters toured northern regions.

According to British officials, she is being held at the Insein prison complex on the outskirts of Yangon, the capital.

But Kelly said the junta's claim that the pro-democracy caravan had provoked the incident was "nonsense."

He insisted Suu Kyi had fallen victim of "a premeditated attack" that was launched on her by "government-affiliated thugs" and left many injured and some dead.

Kelly said the US government was appalled by reports that Suu Kyi was being detained without access to visitors.

"We again call for her immediate release and that of the leadership of her party, the National League for Democracy," he stated. "We call for the formulation of a concrete plan to restore democracy in Burma."

The upcoming measures seek to build on sanctions already in effect, or are expected to be enacted against Myanmar soon, according to administration officials.

The State Department has already slapped new restrictions on visas issued to officials from the Southeast Asian nation, and Congress is about to follow suit.