

Indian defence team to visit Washington

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Defence Secretary Ajay Prasad and a team of top military officers would go to Washington for a meeting to discuss ways to enhance defence cooperation between India and the United States, a defence official said yesterday.

"Prasad and a high-powered team of officers will be leaving for Washington Monday for the defence policy group (DPG) meeting," the official said.

"The DPG is the highest body to chart out the course of bilateral defence cooperation," he said.

The two-day meet will begin on August 6, he added.

According to reports, India and the US will finalise schedules and details of military exercises for the coming year, which will include joint helicopter and fighter maneuvers.

New Delhi is expected to persuade Washington to lift curbs on the transfer of dual-use and high-tech systems, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

Al-Qaeda threatens US over Guantanamo detainees

REUTERS, Dubai

An audio tape purportedly from top al-Qaeda official Ayman al-Zawahiri warned the United States yesterday it would pay a high price if it harmed any of the detainees at the US base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

The tape broadcast by Dubai-based Al Arabiya television also said that the "real battle" against the United States had not started yet.

Washington is holding more than 600 people from 42 nations as prisoners at a special camp at the Guantanamo Bay naval base. US plans to try six of them in military tribunals that can hand out death sentences sparked international criticism.

"America has announced it will start putting on trial in front of military tribunals the Muslim detainees at Guantanamo and might sentence them to death...I swear in the name of God that the crusader

America will pay a dear price for any harm it inflicts on any of the Muslim detainees..." said the tape.

An Arabiya official said the channel believed the voice was that of Zawahiri -- considered to be al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's right-hand man. It was not clear when the tape was made.

Zawahiri has appeared at bin Laden's side in almost every video-taped statement from the al-Qaeda leaders since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, which killed more than 3,000 people.

"We tell America one thing. What you have suffered until now is only the initial skirmishes. The real battle has not started yet..." the tape said.

"Let those who conspire with America know that America is incapable of protecting itself...and let every captive held by the infidels be assured that the day of liberation

is (coming) soon..." it added.

It was the first audio tape said to be by Zawahiri since May 21 when another taped message made threats against the United States.

Washington blames al-Qaeda for the September 11 hijacked plane attacks.

President Bush vowed on Wednesday to thwart what he said was a "real threat" of new al-Qaeda attacks and the Homeland Security Department has warned the airline industry that al-Qaeda was planning new suicide hijackings and bombings in the United States or abroad.

The prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay naval base include nationals from Britain, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan but the US military has not given a precise breakdown.

The detainees, suspected members of al-Qaeda and others caught in what Bush calls the "war on terrorism," have been held and

interrogated without being charged.

Human rights groups have criticised Washington for refusing to give the detainees the rights accorded to prisoners of war under international treaties.

Last month Washington said six suspects, including two Britons and an Australian, could face military trial. It accused them of attending "terrorist" training camps and said they may have been involved in financing al-Qaeda.

Bowing to pressure from Britain and Australia, Washington said later it would not seek the death penalty in any military trials held for the two Britons and Australian.

Media reports and intelligence sources have said that Iran is believed to be holding key al-Qaeda figures, including Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor who set up a militant group that tried to topple Egypt's government in the 1990s.

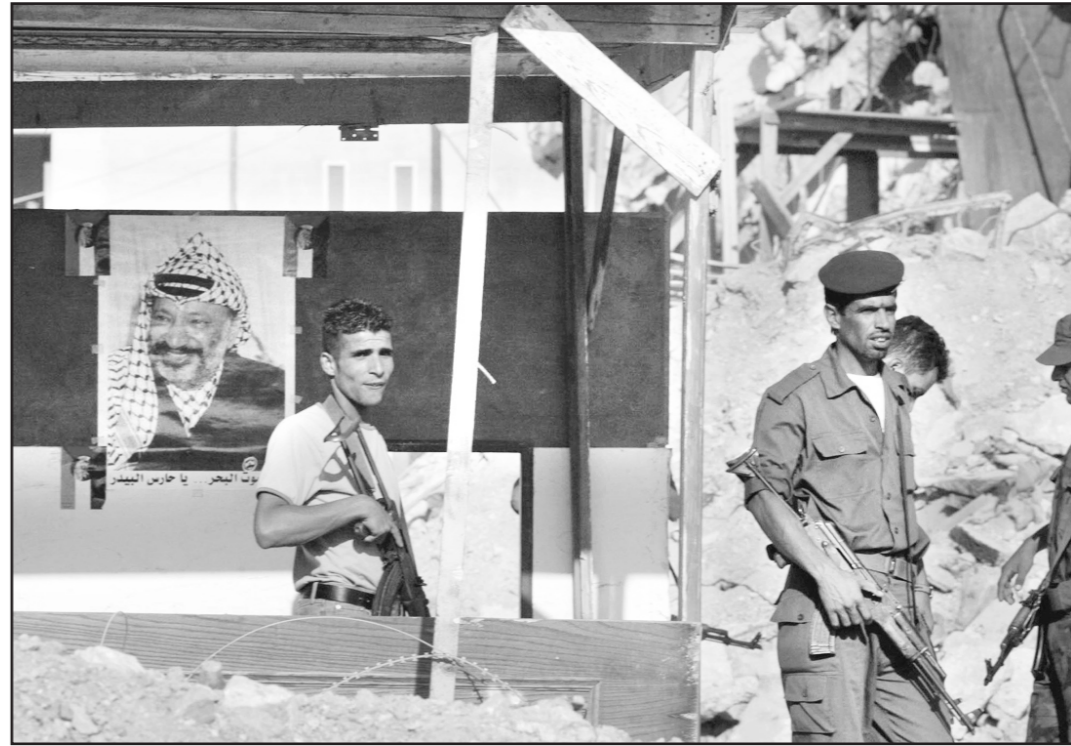


PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian security men stand guard close to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's compound in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Saturday. Palestinian security personnel arrested some 20 wanted militants who had been holed up in the West Bank headquarters compound of veteran leader Yasser Arafat early Saturday in an apparent deal with Israel and the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

Olga, daughter of military pilot Nikolai Malushko (pictured-R), cries next to the coffin of her father during a funeral ceremony in Mozdok yesterday. Rescuers gave up a two-day search for survivors trapped beneath the rubble of a southern Russia military hospital on the edge of Chechnya that was blown to pieces by a suicide bomber who claimed at least 50 lives.

Russian military hospital blast toll rises to 49

AFP, Mozdok

More than a thousand rescuers continued early Sunday to remove the rubble of a Russian military hospital after a second night of relentless work, in a desperate search for survivors of a suicide attack that has claimed at least 49 lives.

Rescue workers early Sunday discovered five more bodies amid the debris of the hospital, the head of the Russian emergencies ministry's crises department said.

This brought the number of people killed in Friday's attack in southern Russia to at least 49, the Interfax news agency quoted General Sergei Salov as saying.

Around 1,300 volunteers and rescuers worked to remove the debris, taking five-minute breaks every hour to listen for voices of people still believed to be trapped.

Authorities meanwhile detained the head of the hospital in southern Russia, accusing him of "criminal negligence" in the Friday evening strike on the facility, which had treated Russian soldiers hurt in the guerrilla war with Chechen separatists.

Surat building blast kills 20, injures 40

AFP, PTI, Surat

At least 20 people were killed yesterday and 40 injured when a huge blast caused a three-story building to collapse in India's western state of Gujarat, a police spokesman said.

Five women were among the dead in the powerful blast leading to two adjoining buildings caving in due to its impact in the textile city early on Sunday, police said.

Surat police commissioner V.K. Gupta said it was believed that several cooking gas cylinders had exploded.

The early morning explosion in the city of Surat, 250 km from Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad, was so powerful that two adjoining buildings also collapsed, he said.

The gas was being used to make holders for cutting and polishing diamonds at a small factory, he said.

Gupta said the workers were asleep in the factory at the time of the blast.

"We believe there may be 15 or 20 more workers trapped inside, though we cannot be sure," he said.

The injured were admitted to three hospitals in the city and about

20 of them were in a serious condition, police said.

An investigation was under way to determine the exact cause of the accident.

Another possibility being probed was whether sub-standard material was used in the construction of the buildings that could have triggered the collapse after the blast, police said.

The impact of the explosion in mini Saurashtra Varachha area was so strong that two adjoining buildings, having commercial establishments, also came crashing down, official sources said.

The entire area has been cordoned off and rescue and relief operations were being conducted on a war footing. Senior district and police officials are supervising the operations.

"Fifty persons are still trapped under the debris, we have rescued 35 persons," Surat Range Commissioner of Police V.K. Gupta said.

The injured have been admitted to three different hospitals and condition of three was critical, police said adding 19 persons were discharged after treatment.

No change in govt's stand on Ayodhya, says Vajpayee

PTI, AFP, New Delhi

Seeking to defuse a gathering storm over his Friday speech, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Sunday said there was no change in Government's stand on the Ayodhya dispute which he felt could be solved either through a negotiated settlement or court verdict.

"There has been no change in our stand on Ayodhya issue. We have been saying from the beginning that a temple should be constructed with mutual agreement and cooperation," Vajpayee told a delegation of Delhi BJP leaders here, a day after he came under attack from opposition parties for his reported statement at the funeral of Paramhans Ramchandra Das that a temple will be built at the birth place of Ram in Ayodhya.

In his speech to party workers at his residence, Vajpayee said the Ayodhya issue could be resolved through mutual agreement with Hindus and Muslims. "Efforts are on in this direction and I believe that

this efforts are moving towards a positive direction," he said.

"The other option is that the issue should be left to the court. Whatever verdict is given by the court, should be accepted by all," Vajpayee said.

The opposition parties on Saturday attacked the Prime Minister for his speech in Ayodhya, accusing him of deviating from NDA agenda and threatened to raise the issue in Parliament on Monday.

NDA ally DMK president M Karunanidhi also demanded that Vajpayee clarify his speech to clear people's "doubts".

Main opposition Congress party spokesman S. Jaipal Reddy, who on Saturday called Vajpayee a "powermongering opportunist", said Vajpayee's clarification did not come as a surprise.

The prime minister was in the habit of making controversial statements and later issuing clarifications, he said Sunday, adding "he has lost trustworthiness."

Paris to host Sri Lankan peace talks

AFP, Colombo

France could host a new round peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tigers rebels, a report said Sunday.

The talks, which have been stalled since April 21 when the Tigers pulled out, are now likely to resume after behind the scenes efforts by Norwegian facilitators, the Sunday Times newspaper here said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suspended their participation in the talks saying the government had failed to deliver on promises made at six rounds of negotiations held since September in Bangkok, Oslo, Berlin and Tokyo.

The guerrillas said the establishment of an interim council for war-ravaged areas was a pre-condition for ending the deadlock in the peace process and resuming discussions aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

On July 17 the government formally presented a set of proposals to set up a provisional administrative structure granting political, administrative and financial authority to the LTTE, which the rebels are considering.

Hizbul warns of more suicide attacks

PTI, Srinagar

The Pro-Pakistan militant outfit Hizbul Mujahideen on Saturday warned of intensifying suicide attacks within and outside Jammu and Kashmir and refused to acknowledge the ceasefire proposal of separatist amalgam Hurriyat Conference.

It is for the militant leadership to decide on the timing of calling off operations, the pro-Pakistan militant outfit's spokesman Junaid Islam told a local English daily in a telephonic interview.

"Ceasefire has its own time and political people cannot decide it. Only militant leadership knows how and when to announce a ceasefire," Islam said.

He said the outfit did not feel the necessity for a ceasefire for dialogue as talks could go on simultaneously.

Hurriyat Chairman Maulana Mohammad Abbas Ansari and newly-elected Amir (chief) of Jamaat-e-Islami had called for a ceasefire between militants and security forces to put an end to bloodshed in the state.

"If we feel that India is sincere in

its approach (to resolve Kashmir issue), then we can think of it. However, at the moment, the Mujahids will intensify their operations against security forces, especially fidayeen (suicide) attacks and expand them to other parts of the country as well," he said.

"Hizb leadership has decided to carry out suicide attacks comprising Pakistani and Kashmiri militants in the coming days. Scores of deadly attacks will be carried out," he claimed.

Islam also said India and Pakistan cannot resolve the issue bilaterally and called for world powers, notably the US to intervene in resolving the dispute.

He parried a question on whether the outfit was involved in the attack on Akhnoor army camp recently and claimed that Hizb cadres were 5000-strong with "negligible presence of foreign militants."

Referring to the ceasefire announced by the slain Hizb leader Abdul Majid Dar, he said, "we gave peace a chance a few years ago, but were forced to call it off because of the Indian attitude."

Sharon's Delhi trip may fuel Indo-Pak tensions: Arafat

AFP, New Delhi

Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat has said he believes an upcoming visit here by Israeli premier Ariel Sharon as well as India's plans to buy military hardware from the Jewish state could worsen tensions between India and Pakistan.

Sharon "can't offer anything... What he is saying (will) escalate the situation and war between Pakistan and India," Arafat said in an interview with the Hindu newspaper published Sunday.

Sharon's visit, beginning on September 9, will be the first by an Israeli head of government since the two countries established full-fledged diplomatic relations in 1992.

It is expected to be dominated by talks on the war on terror, while New Delhi will seek Israel's assistance in controlling infiltration along its border.

India, which recognized Israel soon after the Jewish state's creation in 1948, has traditionally been close to Arafat.

But after establishing diplomatic relations with Israel amid a then-

flourishing Middle East process, they have built up defence cooperation and exchanged visits at the level of foreign minister.

Arch-rivals India and Pakistan have just begun a cautious thawing of frigid relations, after coming to the brink of war last year.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld suggested last year that India should deploy sensors to track the movement of infiltrators from Pakistan-administered Kashmir to Indian-Kashmir -- the main bone of contention between the nuclear rivals.

India accuses Pakistan of training, funding, arming and infiltrating Islamic militants into Indian-Kashmir to sustain an Islamic insurgency against New Delhi in the Himalayan region.

Islamabad denies the charge but admits to extending moral, political and diplomatic support to, what it calls, the Kashmiri freedom movement.

Offers for the sale of sensors came from the United States and Israel and reports said New Delhi is seriously considering the proposals.

According to Arafat, New Delhi's

close relations with Israel were possible due to a peace agreement he signed with the then Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993.

"But we hope that this visit will be a pressure for him (Sharon) to make real peace with your brothers, the Palestinians," he said.

The Palestinian leader also denied reports of differences between him and Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas.

"No. There was tension between him and some of our colleagues. But we have succeeded in solving it," he said.

Arafat said he hoped the brittle peace in the region, which has seen a temporary ceasefire by armed Palestinian groups and an Israeli withdrawal from certain areas of the Gaza Strip, would last.

"It will lead to peace if the Israelis are committed to implementing accurately the roadmap," which paves the way for the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005, calls on Palestinians to crack down on radical militants and urges Israel to freeze Jewish settlement activity.

Liberians brace for more battle as Taylor cedes

REUTERS, Monrovia

Liberians braced for another day of fighting in the capital Sunday, a day after President Charles Taylor promised to hand over power and just hours before African peace-keeping troops are due to deploy.

Taylor's troops launched a blistering attack Saturday to drive rebels back from three bridges in Monrovia and retake the port, but by the end of a torrid, see-saw day at the front, the government offensive had been repulsed.

The battle raged just a couple of miles from where the president met West Africa's top diplomat along with ministers from three countries in the region to discuss Taylor's departure from the war-torn nation.

Under pressure from the United States to quit and hemmed in by rebels bent on ousting the

former warlord, Taylor chose the sixth anniversary of his inauguration as Liberia's president to say he would resign on August 11.

But no date was set for Taylor's departure from the country, something President Bush has said needs to happen for Liberia to find peace after nearly 14-years of civil war, and a goal the rebels have been fighting for three years to attain.

"The most important thing is that everything that we have said about resigning and leaving will happen," Taylor told reporters when asked what date he would leave the country.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed by mortar bombs and bullets, caught in the crossfire during two weeks of fighting between rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy and Taylor loyalists.

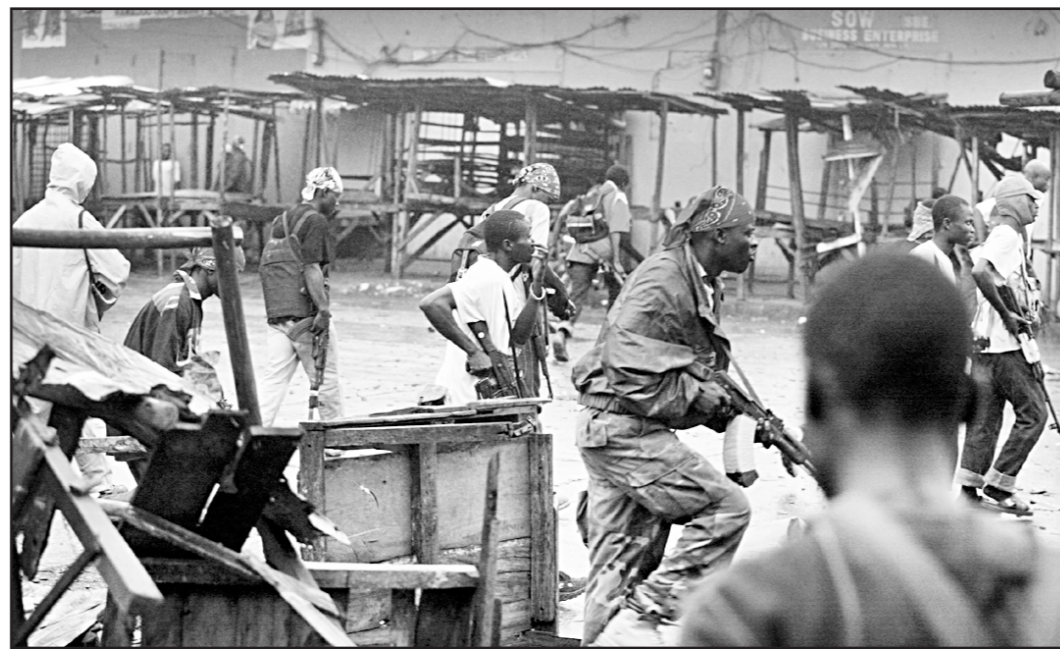


PHOTO: AFP

Loyalist combatants cross the Waterside Market, moving into position in a failed attempt to recapture the strategic Old Bridge in the center of Monrovia on Saturday. Seized by loyalists in the morning, lost again to rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) forces in the afternoon, the bridge remained in rebel hands by evening while Liberian President Charles Taylor announced he would step down on August 11.

Wildfires cause havoc in western Canada

REUTERS, Kamloops

Emergency crews struggled to slow the advance of forest fires on Saturday that have forced several thousand residents to flee their homes in the tinder-dry mountains of British Columbia.

Thick plumes of smoke rose from three fires near Kamloops, British Columbia, one of which was sparked by a discarded cigarette and is now feared to have destroyed as many as 75 structures and a sawmill in the communities of Louis Creek and Barriere, about 185 miles northeast of Vancouver.

Premier Gordon Campbell has declared a state of emergency around Kamloops as crews struggled against fire conditions that some officials have described as the worst the province has seen in 50 years.