

China reassures Pakistan on eve of exercises with India

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday sought to reassure Pakistan on the eve of joint naval exercises with the South Asian nation's rival India, saying bilateral ties would not be affected.

"China has normal state-to-state relations with India and Pakistan," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao told a regular briefing.

"Both of them are good neighbors of China, and I don't think the development of China-India relations will affect the friendly relations between China and Pakistan," he said.

China and India will hold their first-ever joint naval maneuvers Friday, aimed at ensuring the safety of maritime trade and improving search and rescue coordination at sea.

"This cooperation between the two sides will further enrich our friendly relations and will further improve understanding between our armed forces," Liu said.

"This will facilitate a comprehensive and constructive partnership between China and India."

Kashmiri rebel commander killed in Poonch

PTI, Jammu

Security forces gunned down an area commander of Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) outfit in Shindra area of Poonch district while three jawans were injured when terrorists triggered an improvised explosive device (IED) in Mahore area of Udhampur district since Wednesday evening, official sources said here yesterday.

Security forces during an ambush on Wednesday night killed a top LeT terrorist, identified as Abu Harari at Shindra in Poonch district, the sources said adding security forces recovered one AK-47 rifle with its five magazines and 30 rounds and some incriminating documents from the slain terrorist.

Harari was area commander of LeT outfit, they said and pointed out that a search was on to track down other associates of his.

Pakistan detains 13 Indian fishermen

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani maritime officials arrested 13 Indian fishermen yesterday for violating sea boundaries, a week after the warring neighbours exchanged fishermen prisoners as a peace gesture.

"We have arrested these Indian fishermen for fishing inside our area and violating our sea limits, and seized two of their fishing boats," Maritime Security Agency commander Mohammad Zakir told AFP.

On November 7 Pakistan and Indian maritime authorities exchanged fishermen, held for the same reason, as a key confidence-building measure.

Pakistan handed over 74 Indian fishermen and India handed over 93 Pakistanis on a ship on the Arabian Sea.

The coastguards of both countries routinely detain each other's fishermen for straying across de facto maritime borders.

Nepali opposition, Maoists mull anti-king alliance

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels and Nepal's mainstream parties have agreed to discuss closing ranks to demand King Gyanendra call new elections after he sacked the elected government last year, political leaders said yesterday.

The rebels, who want to overthrow the monarchy, have appointed Ram Bahadur Thapa, the commander of their self-styled "People's Liberation Army," to negotiate with leaders of the five major parties.

"So far we have been fighting... separately, but now we feel it is time for the five political parties and the Maoist party to fight unitedly," Thapa, known by the alias Badal, said in a statement.

Badal said without elaborating that he and party leaders had held initial

talks which were "positive."

The five parties, whose months of street demonstrations have done little to change the king's mind, decided at a meeting earlier this week to talk to the Maoists about potentially joining forces.

An alliance would be a dramatic turnaround after years of hostility between the Maoists and the parties that participated in the now-dissolved parliament.

Party leaders estimate around 400 of their activists, viewed by the rebels as part of the elite, have been killed by the Maoists since the insurgency broke out in 1996.

In a sign of the lingering tension between the two sides, former prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala, who heads the largest party the Nepali

Congress, said the rebels needed to disarm before any alliance.

"We want the Maoists to lay down their arms so we can launch an effective movement against the king's regressive steps," Koirala told a rally Thursday in Janakpur, 268 kilometers (167 miles) south of Kathmandu.

The five parties named Madhav Kumar Nepal, their consensus prime ministerial candidate, and far-left leader Amik Serchan to talk to the Maoists, Nepal Peasants and Workers Party chief Narayan Man Bijukchhe, who took part in the parties' discussions, told AFP.

Rebel supreme Pushpa Kamal Dahal in a statement did not comment on disarmament but assured the parties that the guerrillas, whose literature calls

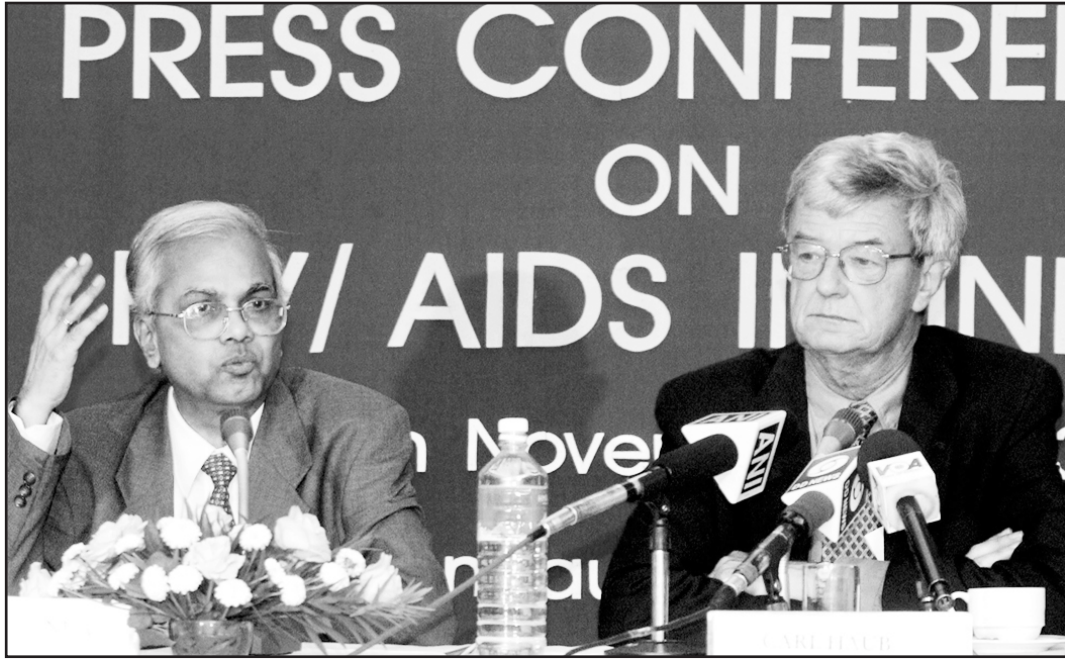
for a one-party communist republic, would respect other parties.

"Nobody should have any doubt that we accept multi-party democracy," said Dahal, better known by the nom de guerre Prachanda, or "The Fierce."

"We appeal to all parties, civil society and intellectuals to join the fight against the Unified Security Command which is the design of US President (George W.) Bush to target India and China and destroy the Nepalese people's unity," he said.

The Unified Security Command, which has also been criticised by the major parties, puts the army in charge of all counter-insurgency operations.

It was set up by the royal-appointed government after the Maoists broke a seven-month ceasefire on August 27.



Executive Director of the Population Foundation of India A.R. Nanda (L) speaks as senior demographer of the Population Reference Bureau in Washington D.C Carl Haub looks on during a conference in New Delhi yesterday jointly organised by the Population Foundation of India and the Population Reference Bureau to release the findings of a study on HIV/AIDS in India. According to the study the number of people living with HIV/AIDS in India increased by 610,000 in 2002, with the total increase in HIV/AIDS cases worldwide in 2002 being five million, meaning that India accounted for 12 percent of the increase in absolute terms.



Indian actress Raveena Tandon (L) interacts with underprivileged children on the eve of Children's Day in Mumbai yesterday. Raveena continues her association with the charity Child Relief and You (CRY) which works towards restoring the basic human rights to underprivileged children across India.

India, Russia agree on action plan to fight terror

AFP, Moscow

Russia and India reaffirmed the strength of their strategic partnership in Kremlin talks late Wednesday in which President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called for an end to "double standards" in the fight against terrorism.

The summit "confirmed the invariably trusting character" of ties between the traditional Soviet-era allies, Putin said, as quoted by the ITAR-TASS news agency.

Putin noted that Vajpayee's visit, his second to Russia and his third bilateral meeting with the Russian leader this year, was "an important staging-post in the strengthening of the strategic partnership" of the two countries.

The two leaders signed a joint statement on the fight against global terrorism and other issues and attended the signing of several agreements on trade and cooperation.

Russia and India favour a "consistent and uncompromising approach to terrorism and the eradication of double standards," they said in a statement quoted by Interfax.

The two countries have proposed a number of "priority and crucial steps to oppose effectively and comprehen-

sively the threat of international terrorism," they said.

As "strategic partners," the statement said, Russia and India favour the establishment of "a comprehensive system of collective security based on the supremacy of law," with the United Nations playing a key role in resolving major international problems.

They also called for the "rapid restoration of the sovereignty of Iraq" under the aegis of the United Nations.

The statement urged the adoption, "under the aegis of the United Nations, of a concrete plan with a precise calendar for the rapid restoration of the sovereignty of Iraq, the stabilisation of the political and humanitarian situation in the country and its economic growth."

In separate comments, Vajpayee voiced concern over the Taliban "threat" in Afghanistan where, he said, "Events are causing anxiety; there exists a threat of the Taliban's return in one form or another".

Noting "many uncertainties" in the reconstruction of the Asian country since the Taliban were ousted in late 2001, Vajpayee called on the international community to renew its commitment to Afghanistan.

'AIDS epidemic in India may reach African levels'

AFP, New Delhi

India could see an AIDS epidemic similar to that in some African countries where the disease is the leading cause of death, a study funded by Microsoft head Bill Gates said yesterday.

The study cited figures from the Indian National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) which said 4.58 million Indians were living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2002, a significant leap from the figure of 3.97 million given the previous year.

"HIV/AIDS is now spreading to the general populace in India and if knowledge of the disease, preventive measures and counselling is not made universal then India could see an epidemic similar to that of some of the African countries," said a release by the Washington-based Population Reference Bureau (PRB) which co-authored the study with the Population Foundation of India (PFI).

"In Africa because adequate efforts were not made to undo the stigma and discrimination related with HIV/AIDS in the early epidemic stages, the disease continued to grow silently and today HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death in Africa," said Carl Haub, senior demographer with the PRB.

He said that because of AIDS life expectancy was expected to fall to 30

between 2005 to 2010, while child mortality was already 30-70 percent higher in some African countries.

India, with a population of more than one billion, has the second largest number of people living with HIV/AIDS after South Africa, which has an infected population of around five million out of a total population of 42 million.

The study was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pledged 200 million dollars to combat the spread of AIDS in India.

Last year Indian officials accused Gates of "spreading panic" for endorsing a study that predicted there would be 20-25 million Indians infected with HIV by 2010.

Haub said the total increase in HIV/AIDS cases worldwide in 2002 was five million of which India accounted for about 12 percent.

"But I have cause to hope that the situation in India may improve as India has in fact taken action," he added.

Study co-author A.R. Nanda, who heads the PFI, said the "problem would have been worse" if the Indian government had not addressed the issue as soon as the first AIDS case was detected in the southern city of Madras in 1986.

"But the trends still indicate the need to remove the social stigma currently associated with HIV/AIDS and ramp up efforts to fight the disease," said Nanda.

Survey on Delhi residents bring good news for Congress

AFP, New Delhi

Most New Delhi residents believe life has improved in the past five years, a survey said yesterday ahead of provincial elections seen as a barometer for national polls.

The survey carried good news for the Congress party, which though in opposition in parliament has governed the Indian capital since 1998.

"Fifty-one percent of Delhiites polled say they and their families are better off economically than they were five years ago. Only 16 percent said they were worse off," said the poll by The Times of India.

It noted "the absence of an anti-incumbency feeling among the voters."

The Congress and India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party will face off December 1 in provincial polls in New Delhi and the states of Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

The northeastern state of Mizoram votes November 20.

The elections are seen as a litmus test for national polls, which must be held by October 2004.

But while the poll found a "feel-good factor" about the economy in New Delhi, it said residents were concerned that police were not tackling growing crime against women.

IAEA report on Iranian nuke 'impossible to believe': US

REUTERS, Washington

A UN watchdog agency's finding that there is no evidence Iran has a nuclear weapons programme is "impossible to believe," Undersecretary of State John Bolton said on Wednesday.

In the first official US reaction to the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Bolton said the report actually reaffirms the US belief that "the massive and covert Iranian effort to acquire sensitive nuclear capabilities make sense only as part of a nuclear weapons programme."

Although the IAEA extensively documented Iran's denials and deceptions over an 18-year period and listed

numerous Iranian violations of international nuclear commitments, "the report nonetheless concluded that no evidence had been found of an Iranian nuclear weapons program," he said.

"The report's assertion is simply impossible to believe," said Bolton, the Bush administration's chief official in charge of arms control and non-proliferation policy.

The IAEA in a report circulated on Monday said Iran had a centrifuge uranium enrichment program for 18 years and a high-tech laser enrichment program for 12 years, both hidden from the United Nations.

It also said Iran produced small

amounts of plutonium, usable in a bomb and with virtually no civilian uses, and conducted secret tests of enrichment centrifuges using nuclear material.

Despite Iran's secretiveness and the activities possibly associated with weapons, the IAEA said there was no proof to date of an arms program. Iran has always denied the charge.

Bolton, at a dinner for the American Spectator magazine, said the IAEA's research established that "Iran is in violation, in multiple instances, of its safeguards obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)."

World's oldest person dies in Japan

AP, Tokyo

A 114-year-old Japanese woman who had assumed the title of the world's oldest person just weeks ago died yesterday, a city spokesman in Hiroshima said.

Mitoyo Kawate, born on May 15, 1889, died of pneumonia, said Masatoshi Yamada. Kawate had been hospitalized earlier in the day when her condition worsened.

London-based Guinness World Records recognized Kawate as the oldest person alive on Oct. 31 after the previous record-holder, Kamato Hongo from southern Japan, passed away.

Indonesian cops predict terror strikes imminent

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Jakarta

Indonesian police issued a fresh warning on Wednesday asking operators and owners of buildings in the capital to beware of possible terrorist attacks, adding that terrorists might strike again soon.

A top police officer familiar with the investigation into terrorism in Indonesia told The Jakarta Post and Kompas dailies that building managements should be on alert as "the attacks could be carried out anytime."

"It is of paramount importance, and necessary for building managements, policemen and the public to be on alert as terrorist suspects Dr. Azahari and Noordin M. Top are still at large and may launch another attack at any time," the one-star police general said,

asking to remain anonymous.

He was referring to Malaysian citizen terrorist suspects, known for their expertise in rigging bombs like those that exploded in Legian, Bali, on Oct. 12 last year and the car bomb that ripped through the lobby of JW Marriott Hotel, Jakarta, on Aug. 5.

Azahari and Noordin managed to evade a police dragnet after the police managed to capture Marriott bombing suspects Thohir and Ismail, in Cirebon, West Java.

The officer showed a list of targets written on a note in Asmar Latin Sani's handwriting. Asmar was the one who allegedly blew himself up, along with the Marriott bomb. The note was discovered in Azahari's rented rooms on Jl. Kebon Kembang, Bandung, West Java.

Oman departs 605 illegal Pak immigrants

AFP, Muscat

Oman has deported 605 Pakistanis for entering the country illegally, newspapers reported yesterday.

Omani police, in collaboration with the army, seized the Pakistanis as they tried to enter the country, in what was the largest single arrest and deportation of illegal Pakistani immigrants.

The police regularly announce swoops on infiltrators into the sultanate, which has a 1,700-kilometre (1,000-mile) coastline, and where foreigners account for a quarter of the population.

More than 13,000 illegal expatriate workers took advantage last year of an amnesty allowing illegal residents to leave without paying hefty fines.

Dialogue with Hurriyat may take place in December: Advani

PTI, Chennai

The dialogue with Hurriyat Conference may be held next month, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani indicated yesterday.

"I think after the holy month of Ramzan and after the elections are over. It may be in December," he told reporters on his way to Chennai.

To a question whether the Centre had received feelers from the separatist amalgam about talks, the Deputy Prime Minister replied in the negative.

Government had announced on October 22 that Advani would hold talks with Hurriyat Conference chairman Maulana Abbas Ansari, a move welcomed by the conglomerate.

Terming the multi-crore fake stamp paper scam as "serious," Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday said those trying to destabi-

lise the country through cross-border terrorism are suspected to be involved in the crime and offered Maharashtra government CBI assistance in the on-going probe, if needed.

Just as in the case of state currency scandal, "our enemies who are trying to destabilise our country through cross-border terrorism are also suspected to be involved in this crime," he said without naming Pakistan.

"Telgi matter is a serious one. It is not only confined to Maharashtra but several states. This scam is wide-spread," Advani told reporters accompanying him to Chennai during his day-long visit there.

The Deputy Prime Minister said he told Maharashtra Chief Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, when the latter called on him a few days back, that if CBI assistance was needed, it would be made available.



West Bank Palestinian Moshref Bazor (C), 26, speaks to reporters at a Palestinian Authority office in Gaza City Wednesday after his expulsion from the West Bank by the Israeli army. The expulsion followed the first, carried out by the army Monday.