

## Strict law to prevent Indian politicians from switching parties

AFP, New Delhi

India's upper house of parliament yesterday approved changes to a law to try to prevent politicians from switching parties in exchange for ministerial posts.

The amendment bars the defectors from ministerial positions until the end of their tenure as a legislator with the party to which they were elected, and will not apply to those who have been expelled from their parties.

It will also restrict the number of ministers allowed in federal and state governments to a maximum of 15 percent of the strength of the parliament or state legislative assembly.

Under the current law defections are illegal unless two-thirds of a party's members switch. These moves are common among India's smaller parties and often are used to pad out the rosters of larger parties.



PHOTO: AFP

Bhutanese soldiers travel in a pick up truck about 18km from the Sandrup Jongkhar district in Bhutan on Wednesday some 145km south of the Indian city of Guwahati. Some 90 Indian separatists and 34 Bhutanese soldiers were killed in a military crackdown in the Himalayan kingdom while many other members of the Bhutanese army were injured in the operation launched on December 15.

# Bhutan captures most of ULFA bases

AFP, Guwahati

Bhutanese soldiers have captured more than half of the 30 Indian separatist bases in the tiny Himalayan kingdom as the military crackdown against the rebels entered its fourth day Thursday, officials said.

"Our troops overran about 19 camps, including several key rebel bases in southern Bhutan," a Royal Bhutan Army commander told AFP by telephone from capital Thimphu.

"The militants are on the run and are fast losing control of their command."

Bhutan on Monday launched its first-ever modern military operation to evict three Indian separatist

rebel groups that have set up illegal bases in the south of the kingdom.

Some 6,000 Bhutanese troops are involved in the offensive against the rebels who had ignored previous warnings to leave the tiny Buddhist kingdom.

Two separatist groups from Assam -- the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), as well as the separatist Kamatapur Liberation Organisation from West Bengal, have well-entrenched bases in Bhutan.

The groups are fighting for independent homelands in India and have been carrying out hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on federal soldiers from their bases in Bhutan

for several years.

Ninety Indian separatists and 34 Bhutanese soldiers have been killed in the operation, Indian news agencies reported Wednesday quoting unnamed Indian intelligence sources.

There was no official confirmation of the toll from either New Delhi or Thimphu.

Bhutan said on Tuesday that 16 of its soldiers had been injured, four seriously, in retaliatory strikes by militants and had been evacuated by Indian army helicopters to Indian hospitals.

The ULFA military commander Paresh Baruah on Tuesday claimed government soldiers had killed five children at one of their camps in a mortar attack.

"We are yet to get details about the total number of deaths and injured," Yashe Dorji, Director of Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said by telephone from the southern district headquarters of Sandrup Jongkhar.

The three rebel groups said they launched combined attacks overnight on Bhutanese soldiers with explosives and gunfire.

"We have inflicted heavy casualties on the Bhutanese troops and in several areas the government soldiers were forced to retreat," Baruah said by telephone from an undisclosed location.

## Talks with India after Saarc summit, says Kashmiri separatist

AFP, Srinagar

The first high-level talks between New Delhi and separatists who want an end to Indian rule in Kashmir will take place after a key regional summit in Pakistan next month, a senior separatist said yesterday.

India in October surprised all sides when for the first time it offered direct talks to the moderate faction of Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC).

The separatist, who did not want to be named, said that a formal invitation had not yet been received. But the separatist said they had "been given indications" by New Delhi that the talks would take place after the South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation (Saarc) summit from January 4 to 6 in Islamabad.

"It is good. Let us see what comes out of Saarc meetings," the separatist said.

New Delhi will be represented at the table by Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, while the separatists will be headed by Hurriyat chairman Abbas Ansari, a leading Shiite cleric.

Bilateral talks have been opposed by hardline separatists, who want the talks to also involve Pakistan.

Led by Syed Ali Geelani, who is staunchly pro-Pakistan, they have the backing of Muslim rebels and Pakistan, and analysts say without their involvement talks are unlikely to succeed in bringing peace to the region.

## India, US likely to ink pact on sharing tech

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States are likely to sign an agreement this week that will lead to cooperation in the space and civilian nuclear fields and sharing of other sophisticated technology, a report said yesterday.

The Indian Express newspaper said the agreement would mean a shift in the US stance from "presumption of denial" to "presumption of approval" for export of sensitive technologies to India, marking a transformation in relations between the two countries.

Washington imposed military sanctions on India and Pakistan after the rivals conducted nuclear tests in 1998.

The sanctions were lifted after both countries promised support for the US-led "war on terrorism" following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US.

It was not clear if the agreement would free up access to dual-use technology.

## India, Pakistan meet to restore rail links

AFP, New Delhi

Indian and Pakistani railway officials yesterday began a meeting to discuss the restoration of passenger rail services broken off two years ago amid tensions between the nuclear rivals.

Pakistan Railways additional general manager, Muhammad Iqbal Khatari, who is leading a four-member delegation to New Delhi, said he hoped the Samjhauta Express, which used to run from Attari in northern Indian state of Punjab to the Pakistani city of Lahore, would resume by January 1.

Railway officials said the technical talks would focus on the fare structure, frequency and other operational issues.

"Our effort is to get this train to run again as part of the comprehensive peace effort between India and Pakistan," Indian

Railway Minister Nitish Kumar told reporters.

Rail, air and bus links were severed by India after a bloody attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001, which New Delhi blamed on pro-Pakistan militants. The attack brought the two nations to the brink of war.

Relations began to improve after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan on April 18.

Since then the two countries have restored diplomatic ties, resumed a bus service between Lahore and New Delhi and even called a truce in the disputed Kashmir region where the rivals have fought two wars.

The two sides have also agreed to restore air links from January.

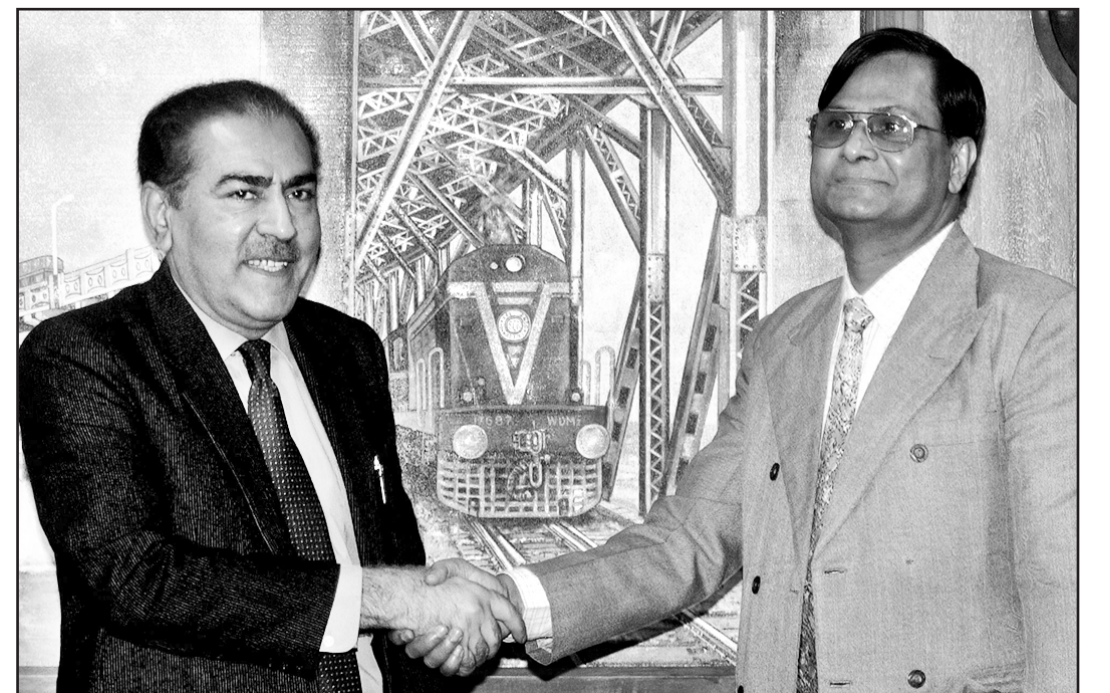


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan Railways additional general manager, Muhammad Iqbal Khatari (L) shakes hands with Indian Railway additional Member S.B. Ghosh Dastidar during a meeting at the Indian Railway Headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. A four-member Pakistani delegation is in India for talks on restoring the Samjhota Express passenger rail services severed two years ago between the neighbouring countries.

## Landmine blast kills 10 troops in Nepal

PTI, Kathmandu

Ten security personnel, including an army lieutenant, have been killed and seven others injured when an army truck ran over a landmine planted by Maoist rebels in west Nepal, police sources here said.

Five army soldiers and five policemen were killed in the explosion in Dhankhola area in the border between Dang and Kaptivastu districts, 400 km west of Kathmandu, on Wednesday, a police official said, adding seven security personnel were also injured in the incident.

Joint teams of Nepalese security forces have launched a massive search operation following the incident.

No casualty has, however, been reported on the Maoist side.

## 2 Japanese boys knifed in classroom by intruder

AFP, Tokyo

Two seven-year-old schoolboys were stabbed yesterday when a knifeman broke into their classroom in western Japan, a police spokesman said.

The boys suffered only minor cuts to the head and were released after hospital treatment, but the attack followed other violent crimes targeting schoolchildren.

The unidentified 45-year-old attacker, who was unemployed, attacked the children during the lunch break at a primary school in Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture, some 350km west of Tokyo. The man was quickly overpowered by teachers.

The attacker, from Uji City, told police he had been "hospitalised" in the past, according to Kyoto police. "He is telling us things that just don't make any sense," the police spokesman said.

In 1999, a seven-year-old boy was stabbed to death by a 21-year-old intruder at another grade school in Kyoto Prefecture.

In 2001, a mentally-disturbed man, aged 37, killed eight elementary schoolchildren at Osaka, near Kyoto. He was sentenced to death in August this year.



PHOTO: AFP

United Arab Emirates security officials frisk Iraqi citizens waiting to be repatriated at Chaklala Air Base in Rawalpindi yesterday. Pakistan is repatriating 37 Iraqi citizens who were arrested and then jailed for entering illegally in Pakistan to seek asylum during the regime of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

## Two constables killed in attack on police office in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Two police constables and a militant were killed yesterday in an attack on the office of a top-ranking police official in the heart of a high-security zone in Kashmir, police said.

One police constable died when an unknown number of rebels attacked the high security office of the deputy inspector general of Rajouri town, 150km northwest of the state winter capital Jammu, said Inspector General of police at P.L. Gupta.

An injured policeman died on way to hospital.

A militant was gunned down by security forces, but it was unclear whether there were more rebels in the area.

Gupta said that police and army personnel were searching the site.

## Women in Indian village build own mosque

AFP, New Delhi

A group of Muslim women in an Indian village, fed up with what they say are sexist decisions made by the male authorities particularly in divorce cases, have decided to build their own mosque, a report said Thursday.

The women in the village of Parambu in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have formed a group called Chaaya (Shadow) and acquired land to build the mosque, the Hindustan Times daily said.

"This decision was taken after we found male-dominated jamaats (dispute settlement forums) handing down discriminatory verdicts in family disputes, especially in divorce matters," said Sherifa, the convener of Chaaya, who uses just one name.

"When a man seeks divorce, only his case is heard by the jamaat. The wife is never called for a hearing, saying that women are not permitted inside mosques, where the jamaat usually sits," she said.

A woman priest well-versed in the Koran and Islamic tenets is to take charge at the new mosque.

"A survey conducted by us showed that in one out of every five Muslim households, there is at least one case of desertion by the husband or second marriage by the man, citing some mental or physical disability of the first wife," said Rasheeda, another villager.

## N Korea to keep on building nukes until US accepts terms

AFP, Seoul

North Korea will continue to build nuclear weapons until Washington drops its hostile policy and accepts the Stalinist state's terms for an end to the nuclear crisis, Pyongyang's official media said yesterday.

North Korea has offered a package of "simultaneous actions" to resolve the impasse while Washington wants North Korea to move first on scrapping its nuclear weapons drive.

"The DPRK's (North Korea's) stand to beef up its nuclear deterrent force will remain unchanged no matter what others may say as long as the United States keeps pursuing a policy to threaten and stifle the DPRK with nukes while turning down its proposal for (a) simultaneous package solution to the nuclear issue," said Rodong Simnun, the ruling Workers' Party newspaper in a commentary.

North Korea has been seeking a non-aggression pact with the United States and said it needed nuclear weapons because Washington was "watching for a

chance to mount a preemptive nuclear attack..."

"The nuclear deterrent force is a decisive means for coping with the US threat of war," the newspaper said in the dispatch carried by the official Korean Central News Agency. "This situation compels the DPRK to keep and steadily increase its nuclear deterrent force."

The United States believes North Korea already has one or two crude nuclear bombs and could speedily build more using a stockpile of spent nuclear fuel at its Yongbyon nuclear complex north of Pyongyang.

North Korea says it has already reprocessed the rods, yielding enough plutonium for five or six bombs.

The commentary came amid renewed diplomatic efforts to bring North Korea to the negotiating table next month for a new round of talks among the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia and the United States following an inconclusive first round in Beijing in August.

## 70 quarantined in Singapore for SARS

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, Singapore

Seventy people here have been put under home quarantine until tomorrow, in case they were in contact with a visiting Taiwanese medical researcher diagnosed with SARS after going home on Dec 10.

But if none fall ill by tomorrow, Singapore could be in the clear, although the health care system is on alert and Changi Airport will check passengers from Taiwan.

Taiwan health officials and the World Health Organisation (WHO) said this seems to be an isolated case.

But the news sent a shudder through Asian stock markets; Taiwan's fell 135 points, its worst one-day drop in seven months.

The scare comes seven months after the all-clear was first sounded in Singapore, but only three months after a medical researcher here got infected, also in a laboratory.

At the heart of the scare now is a Lieutenant-Colonel Chan, 44, a senior researcher at the highly-secretive Institute of Preventive Medicine of Taiwan's National Defence Medical Centre.

## Lankan leaders fail to resolve crisis

### Peace process put on hold

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's political crisis is set for a long deadlock as the squabbling president and prime minister failed to agree who should control the military, an official said yesterday.

Both sides have agreed to keep up negotiations through senior officials but no resumption of talks was likely until early next year, government spokesman G. L. Peiris said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who are from rival parties, met several times in recent weeks to try to find a way to work together.

They had set a deadline of Monday to resolve their differences but with no breakthrough, decided to extend it.

"They have made progress on having a consensus on the economy, good governance and things like that but on the key issue of defence, there is no agreement,"

Peiris told reporters.

On November 4, Kumaratunga sacked the defence, interior and information ministers, took over their portfolios and suspended parliament for two weeks.

Shortly afterwards Wickremesinghe said he could not lead the peace process with the Tamil Tiger rebels because he no longer had control over defence.

Norwegian peace brokers also suspended their role, saying there was no clarity as to who was in charge in Colombo.

There has been no agreement on re-starting the peace initiative, Peiris said, adding the Norwegians were ready to resume their work provided the political crisis was resolved.

Political analysts and diplomats have speculated that the president may call snap elections, which would be four years ahead of schedule, to end the political impasse.

The country will hold key local

council elections starting March and enabling both sides to test their electoral strength.

Meanwhile, just a few weeks ago Sri Lanka seemed set to start historic talks aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed, but a power struggle between the president and prime minister has shattered the high hopes that ushered in 2003.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) unveiled their first ever blueprint for peace on November 1 clearing the way for a resumption of talks which they had put on hold in April, saying the government was failing to deliver on its promises.

Sri Lanka's foreign backers, led by the United States, Japan, the European Union and India, welcomed the move to restart talks, but the bubble burst just four days later when the president sparked a power struggle with her premier.