

TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM 3 KASHMIR CITIES

Delhi says blunt 'no' to Musharraf's proposal

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India on Saturday night rejected Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's proposal for withdrawal of troops from three cities of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir as part of efforts to resolve the Kashmir row.

Reacting to Musharraf's remarks on the issue in an interview to television news channel CNN-IBN, Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told reporters here that India viewed Pakistan's implementation of its January 2004 commitment to end cross-border terrorism as

"unconditional" and not linked to the proposal by Musharraf.

Musharraf said during the interview that if India demilitarises three cities of Jammu and Kashmir—summer capital Srinagar, Kupwara and Baramulla—he would ensure end of militancy in these areas.

Sarna said any demilitarisation or redeployment of security forces within the territory of India "is a sovereign decision and cannot be dictated by a foreign government."

"Such decisions are based on our assessment of the security situation prevailing in any part of the country. As long as the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir

and indeed in other parts of the country is adversely affected by the phenomenon of cross-border terrorism and violence perpetrated by Pakistan-based terrorist groups, the government of India will fulfil its responsibility to safeguard the lives and security of its citizens," he said.

The Indian Foreign Ministry said Musharraf seemed to suggest that if India withdrew its troops from the three Jammu and Kashmir cities, he would ensure "there was no militancy."

But "what we are talking about here is terrorism and not mere militancy" and terrorism has to stop, Sarna said.

He reminded Musharraf of his commitment that Pakistan would not allow its territory to be used for cross-border terrorism against India. "The implementation of this commitment is unconditional. Pakistan should implement its solemn commitments forthwith so that the peace process can make progress."

The two nuclear-powered South Asian neighbours initiated the peace process in 2003 and have taken several confidence-building measures like reopening of bus, air and rail links and holding of Foreign Ministerial and Foreign Secretary level talks.

UN envoy to Myanmar quits after entry ban

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The United Nations envoy to Myanmar, Razali Ismail, said yesterday he had quit his post after being refused entry for the past two years to the military-ruled country where he is pushing for reforms.

Razali, a former Malaysian diplomat who has been trying to break Myanmar's political impasse since 2000, said he would not renew his contract, which ran until the end of last year.

"My contract lapsed after December 2005. It is clear they (the military junta) do not want me back," Razali told AFP.

"I have not been allowed to visit the Myanmar leadership in Yangon in the past 22 months."

He said that the United Nations had accepted his decision to quit his role as secretary-general Kofi Annan's special envoy to Myanmar.



PHOTO: AFP

Buddhadhev Bhattacharya, (R) Chief Minister of West Bengal state shares a light moment with his predecessor veteran Communist leader Jyoti Basu (L) at a mammoth gathering of party activists in Kolkata yesterday. Basu addressed the gathering to kick off the election campaign for the forthcoming state elections at the rally organised by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI(M), which has been the ruling party of the state for the last 29 years.

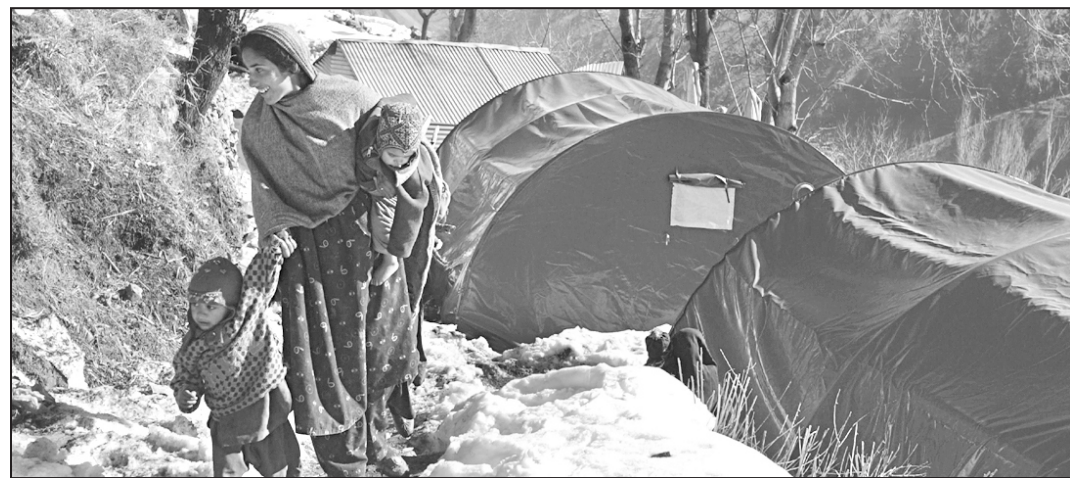


PHOTO: AFP

Three months after the October 8 earthquake, survivors walk near tents, given by a non-governmental organisation in Kandia, in the north of Pakistan yesterday. Authorities have decided to distribute kerosene oil stoves among earthquake survivors in Pakistan to save them from freezing temperatures despite fears of tent blazes that have claimed several lives, the United Nations said.

Delhi gets first winter ice in 70 years

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian capital yesterday saw its first winter frost in 70 years as a cold wave sweeping in from the frigid heights of the Himalayas killed more people in northern India overnight, officials said.

The capital city of 14 million people ordered schools shut for three days beginning Monday as the mercury for the first time since 1935 plummeted to 0.2 degrees C (32.36 F) Sunday, leaving mounds of ice on cars parked in the open.

White-laced streets greeted early risers in New Delhi but any novelty value brought by the cold temperatures soon died as frost on

power cables sparked partial power cuts across large swathes of the crowded city, the privately-run BSES utility providers said.

In 1935, Delhi recorded minus 0.6 degrees Celsius.

"I was born in New Delhi and this is the first time we are seeing ice on grass... It's just like snow... It's heavenly," said Supriya Singh, a fashion designer. Her jubilation was not shared by the city's homeless thousands.

Haryana state's Karnal city which adjoins New Delhi also shivered at 0.1 Celsius, eight degrees below normal for this time of the year, the weather officials said.

Lanka bans night fishing

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy banned night fishing yesterday near a northeastern port, while it searched for the bodies of 15 crewmen killed when their gunboat was destroyed in a suicide bombing by suspected Tiger rebels.

Fishing just outside the port of Trincomalee was limited to daytime, officials announced to the local fishing communities after Saturday's pre-dawn attack carried by an explosives-laden boat within a fishing flotilla.

There was no immediate reaction from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the military's allegations, but the guerrillas

accused the navy of preventing Tamil fishermen from earning a living by banning fishing.

"The Sri Lankan Navy has banned fishing for Tamil fishermen in most sections of the north seas of the Jaffna peninsula," the LTTE said in a statement posted on its peace secretariat website.

The Tigers said nearly 1,000 families had been affected but the navy said the restriction applied to night fishing only.

Navy officials quoted two sailors who jumped into the water just before their Dvora gunboat was blown up as saying that a small craft that mingled with a flotilla of fishing boats had carried out the attack.

"The craft was about 30 metres

(yard) away when the sailors noticed it making a dash for the gunboat," a navy source quoted a sailor as saying. "There was not enough time to move away or open fire."

The two sailors were rescued by fishermen but the other 15 crewmen are missing presumed dead.

Naval craft were also looking for the wreckage of the Israeli-built gunboat that was sunk and brought the biggest loss on the military since a truce in 2002.

"A search is underway but we have not been able to locate any wreckage," a defence ministry spokesman said. "We had some reports that a few bodies (of sailors) had been found by fishermen, but the navy could not confirm it."

Ally threatens to quit Musharraf govt

REUTERS, Islamabad

A key party allied to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf threatened yesterday to quit the ruling coalition if a military crackdown in troubled Baluchistan province was not halted by Friday.

The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) wants the government to use talks to settle the problems it faces with restive tribes and groups seeking more autonomy for the southwestern province.

"If the government does not stop the current military operation in Baluchistan by January 13, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement will pull out of the government in

protest on January 14," an MQM statement said.

The Pakistani military launched a major crackdown against militants in Baluchistan after a rocket attack on Dec. 14 during a visit by President Pervez Musharraf.

Baluch nationalists say almost 200 people have been killed in the crackdown. The government has not commented on overall casualties.

Any pull-out from the coalition is unlikely to immediately affect the federal cabinet of Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz whose Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and other allies will continue to have a majority in the 342-seat National Assembly.

Maoists bomb Nepali municipal building

AFP, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoist rebels set off a bomb in a municipal building in southwestern Nepal early yesterday but caused no casualties, police said.

The bomb badly damaged the ground floor of the building but no one was injured or killed, a police official said.

"They had planted two bombs but only one went off," said the official, who asked not to be named.

"The security forces defused (the other) bomb inside the building."

The incident took place at

Nepalgunj, 500km southwest of the capital Kathmandu.

The rebels have detonated about a dozen bombs across the country since ending a unilateral four-month ceasefire on January 2.

A rebel and five policemen have been killed in clashes while 11 people have been injured in explosions and clashes since then.

The rebels, battling for the past decade to overthrow the monarchy in a conflict that has claimed more than 12,000 lives, said they decided to end the ceasefire because the royalist government refused to match it.