



US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns (R) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Burns discussed Indian access to civilian nuclear technology and the proposed Indo-Iranian gas pipeline project with Saran.

India, Pakistan agree on peace, differ on process

REUTERS, New Delhi

India and Pakistan on Wednesday made a fresh commitment to push forward a fragile peace process but the nuclear-armed neighbours reiterated their differences over ways to end nearly 60 years of enmity.

Top diplomats of the two countries agreed that two-year-old peace talks had helped boost relations and that they were optimistic despite fears that the dialogue had reached a stalemate.

But they stuck to familiar positions on the territorial dispute over Kashmir -- at the heart of India-Pakistan rivalry -- and what New

Delhi says is terrorist violence emanating from militant groups based in Pakistan.

"The two foreign secretaries ... expressed satisfaction at the progress made during the composite dialogue process," a joint statement said at the end of two days of talks between the heads of the two foreign ministries.

"The two sides reiterated their resolve to carry forward the peace process and maintain its momentum," it said.

The arch rivals launched new peace moves after teetering near the brink of another war over Kashmir in 2002. The dispute over the Himalayan region has been the

cause of two of three wars between the neighbours.

Ties have since improved significantly with the resumption of several transport links between the two sides and decisions to reduce military tensions and improve communication channels as a truce between the two armies holds successfully.

The two sides are yet to tackle the Kashmir dispute. The peace process ran into trouble around September last year when Pakistan accused India of dragging its feet over Kashmir while New Delhi said Islamabad was not keeping its promise to curb anti-Indian militants.

Mediator tones down Lankan peace hopes

Colombo extends state of emergency, 4 killed in mine blast

AFP, REUTERS, Oslo/Colombo

Four people were killed and 40 wounded in bomb attacks in Sri Lanka yesterday as Colombo vowed "every endeavour" to revive peace moves, while a top Norwegian envoy played down hopes of breakthrough.

Sri Lanka peace mediator Erik Solheim yesterday played down hopes that his visit to the conflict-ridden island next week would lead to a resumption of peace talks between the Colombo government and the Tamil rebels.

"It's very important to play down the expectations," Solheim, who is Norway's development aid minister, told reporters ahead of his January 23-26 visit when he will

meet with representatives of the two sides.

"What could hopefully be achieved through this visit is some kind of understanding between the parties on how they would stabilize the ceasefire and reduce the far too high number of ceasefire violations that we're seeing at the moment," he added.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's three-decade-long Tamil separatist campaign led by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Despite a ceasefire reached in February 2002, more than 136 people have been killed since violence flared in early December.

In a latest attack suspected

Tamil Tiger rebels set off a powerful landmine in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday, killing at least four people and wounding 20, the military said.

A bomb attached to a bicycle went off as an army truck passed in the town of Batticaloa, a local military commander told AFP when contacted by telephone.

He said three policemen and a civilian were killed in the explosion while seven soldiers, 13 policemen and three bystanders were wounded.

Three bomb attacks yesterday that wounded at least 27 people shattered a brief lull in violence in Sri Lanka's embattled northeastern regions, military officials said.

Solheim's comments came after

the Colombo government said it hoped he would be able to "break the ice" and lead the two parties to the negotiating table.

The peace talks have been stalled since April 2003.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka extended a countrywide state of emergency yesterday as suspected Tamil Tiger rebels kept up sporadic attacks against the military ahead of a last-ditch peace effort despite protests by minority Tamil legislators.

The parliament was in session for just five minutes and unanimously approved the tough laws that allow security forces and police to arrest and detain suspects for long periods, parliamentary officials said.

Pakistan rebuilds clinics in quake zone

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Pakistan has started to rebuild clinics destroyed by October's huge earthquake as harsh winter weather fuels fears of disease outbreaks, officials said yesterday.

Authorities in Pakistani-administered Kashmir said the new clinics, which offer free treatment, would nearly double the number of beds, which were available before the disaster.

"We have started rebuilding 61 basic health units and seven rural health centres with pre-fabricated materials in Muzaffarabad and the Neelum valley," local health chief Sardar Mahmood Ahmed Khan told AFP, referring to the capital of Pakistani Kashmir and a valley leading out of the city.

Groups including the United Nations Children's Fund and the UN Population Fund were helping the government with the work.

The earthquake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir and seriously injured about the same number, many of whom still require treatment for broken limbs and other problems.

Senior al-Qaeda figures believed killed in US strike

REUTERS, Islamabad

An al-Qaeda bomb expert with a \$5 million bounty on his head and a son-in-law of the group's No. 2 were among four militants believed killed by a US airstrike last week, Pakistani intelligence sources said yesterday.

There was no official confirmation, however, and the bodies of militants have not been recovered from the remote tribal area close to the Afghan border which was targeted last Friday.

Eighteen villagers were killed in the attack, prompting Pakistan to protest against the US action.

Intelligence sources said they believed they knew the names of three men killed in the attack, which US officials say was aimed at al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri.

One of the dead was said to be

Abdul Rehman Al-Misri al-Maghribi, a son-in-law of Zawahiri. Maghribi was responsible for al-Qaeda's media department.

Another was Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar, an expert in explosives and poisons who carried a \$5 million US bounty on his head under the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Rewards for Justice programme.

Pakistani officials gave a slightly different spelling for the name, but the FBI says Umar ran a training camp at Derunta in Afghanistan and since 1999 had proliferated training manuals containing crude recipes for chemical and biological weapons.

ABC News and the New York Times, citing Pakistani officials, also reported that the 52-year-old Egyptian had been killed, although there was no official confirmation.

Suu Kyi's home security eased

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military rulers have slightly eased security around pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's home, where she has been held under house arrest since May 2003, officials said yesterday.

Special branch police forces have removed a barricade that had blocked most traffic to the street that passes in front of the Nobel Peace Prize winner's lakeside home, as well as a "No entry" sign.

"The barrier was lifted for the convenience of cars that want to pass down the road," a home affairs ministry official told AFP.

"Now taxis can use this road from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, said they did not expect much change to result from the removal of the barrier, as security forces were still guarding both her home

and the surrounding area.

"I cannot say she will be freed because of this," party spokesman U Lwin said. "I think it was because of traffic jams."

Myanmar has come under mounting international pressure to make good on its promises of democratic reform, and a regional envoy has insisted on visiting Aung San Suu Kyi during an eventual trip to the country.



PHOTO: AFP

Workers of Pasban organisation, a student wing of the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party chant anti-US slogans during a demonstration in Peshawar yesterday to protest against the killing of 18 tribesmen on January 13 in an air raid at the remote tribal region bordering Afghanistan.