

# New Indo-Pak rail link sparks reunion hopes

AFP, Zero Point

Mohammad Sauleh fled his birthplace in India 41 years ago amid the crash of artillery shells, but the dreams of returning to the sound of train wheels going 'clickety-clack'.

The Pakistani shepherd wants to see his kinsmen in Peethagarh, a tiny Indian border village from which he escaped with his parents during the 1965 war between the South Asian rivals.

The poverty-stricken 48-year-old is set to see his wish come true when the two countries open their second cross-border rail link on Saturday, between southern Pakistan and western India, decades after it was severed.

"I did not even imagine I would see my native village in India again," said an excited Sauleh. "But now I will definitely visit my uncles, aunts and other relatives from whom we

have spent 41 years apart."

Indian and Pakistani officials agreed in January to restart the train service, the latest in a series of moves to boost their slow-moving peace process.

Named the Thar Express, after a Pakistani desert in the region, the link will run every Saturday and return the same day.

A long-running train service already exists between Attari in India and the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore. It was suspended from 2002 to 2004 because of Indo-Pakistani tensions.

But Lahore is hundreds of kilometres (miles) to the north, too far away and too expensive to reach for many of the thousands of divided families living in Pakistan's southern province of Sindh and the port city of Karachi.

Most of the millions of Muslims who fled India for the newly-created

Pakistan after independence from Britain in 1947 migrated to those regions and they have been looking forward to return trips since then.

"People had no option to travel through Lahore but we expect that 70 percent of traffic would divert to the Thar Express now," said Ghulam Rasool, station master at Mirpurkhas, the last stop on the Pakistani side.

The train's journey begins on the Arabian Sea coast in Karachi, Pakistan's biggest city, and stretches some 400 kilometres northeast through scrubland and desert to Munabao in India.

Almost a third of the track -- from Pakistan's Mirpurkhas to Munabao -- was abandoned after the 1965 war and Pakistani railway authorities have embarked on a lightning plan to replace it.

"We have replaced the meter-gauge track with a new broad-gauge one and completed the work

in eight months, which normally takes three years," said Amin Mohammad Dawoodpota, engineer in charge at Mirpurkhas.

Last-minute preparations were still going on this week as railway workers attached new baseplates and finished off immigration and customs facilities at Zero Point, a station about 100 meters (yards) inside the Indian border.

"At Zero Point we will carry out all immigration, customs and screening work and after clearance passengers can cross into India," said Major Mohammad Afzal, security chief of Pakistan's paramilitary Rangers force.

The train is expected to boost the economy both near the desert station and further afield. Real estate prices in nearby towns have strengthened recently and locals expect prices to shoot up.



A small child is carried from the landslide-hit area on Leyte island in the eastern Philippines yesterday. A rain-soaked mountainside disintegrated into a torrent of mud Friday, burying hundreds of houses and an elementary school in the eastern Philippines. Hundreds of people were feared dead in the mudslide.

## Nepal detains more journalists than any other country

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal arrested more journalists than any other country since 2004, many during pro-democracy protests, an international media watchdog said while urging the royalist government to free seven still in detention.

The Paris-based group, Reporters Without Borders (RWB), said in a statement received on Friday that at least 114 journalists were arrested while doing their job or taking part in pro-democracy protests from Jan. 20.

"Nepal has, since 2004, arrested more journalists than any other country worldwide," it said.

It said while most of those arrested or detained had been freed, seven journalists were still being held.

"Whether they were arrested for their articles or for demonstrating for press freedom, their detention is abusive," the group said.

Nepali authorities do not comment on the arrests or detentions or provide reasons for picking up journalists.



A Pakistani pedestrian walks past a pile of burning tyres during a demonstration in Karachi yesterday. Pakistani police put a firebrand Islamic leader, Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, under house arrest and detained nearly 150 others as violent new protests against cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) continued.

## Pakistan recalls envoy to Denmark

Cops net 150 over cartoon protests

AFP, Islamabad/Lahore

Pakistan's ambassador to Denmark has been called back to Islamabad "for consultations" amid a continuing row over cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM), the foreign office said yesterday.

The move comes shortly after officials said that Denmark, where the drawings were first published in September, had temporarily closed its embassy in Islamabad.

"The embassy is temporarily closed until further notice," the message said.

Danish embassy officials were not immediately available but the closure was also confirmed by diplomatic sources in Islamabad speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Pakistan's ambassador in Copenhagen, Mr Javed A. Qureshi, has been called to Islamabad for consultations over the cartoon controversy," foreign ministry spokeswoman

Tasnim Aslam told AFP.

Government sources said the decision was made during a meeting between top Pakistani foreign ministry officials and the Danish ambassador in Islamabad, Bent Wigotski, at the ministry on Friday.

Aslam said she was not aware that the Denmark embassy had shut.

"They have not informed us," she said.

Earlier Pakistani police put a firebrand Islamic leader under house arrest and arrested around 150 others yesterday as violent protests against cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) entered a fifth day.

Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, founder of the militant Lashkar-e-Taiba outfit fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, was detained in Lahore to stop him giving a sermon on the controversy after Friday prayers, his spokesman said.

## Nepali Maoists hope to end monarchy

AP, Kathmandu

For a man who spends much of his time holed up in rundown apartment on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Biraj is supremely confident his vision of a communist Nepal will soon become reality.

Emboldened by a string of setbacks to the Himalayan nation's absolute king, Maoist rebels like Biraj are striking deep into urban areas and working with major political parties to topple the monarchy.

Many, including the US ambassador, see a Maoist takeover as a possibility.

Biraj described himself Thursday as a low level political officer in the rebel movement, one of those responsible for recruiting followers and enforcing ideology.

While he refused to discuss specifics of his work, he insisted he goes about his job with a soft touch. "We speak with people, they are

convinced by our message," he said.

The rebels, however, have a history of threatening and even killing those who don't obey.

"This country is going to go our way. The king will soon find himself dead," said Biraj, who would give only his first name for fear of arrest.

King Gyanendra tossed out an interim government last February, saying he needed to bring order to a chaotic and corrupt political scene that had alienated many of Nepal's 27 million people. He promised to quell the rebellion, which has claimed nearly 13,000 lives in the past decade.

The result has been the opposite: Rebels attacks have intensified, the economy has nose-dived and the populace's disenchantment with politics has spread to the king.

US Ambassador James Moriarty warned this week that "the Maoists will ultimately seize power" unless Gyanendra and the political elite settle their differences.

Diplomats and analysts say the Maoist movement is the only group that can influence large numbers of Nepalis, such as the nationwide strike the rebels ordered during municipal elections Feb. 8.

Such support isn't always for ideological reasons many people fear for their safety if they cross the rebels.

Still, the Maoists' communist vision such as abolishing private property resonates deeply in Nepal, where per capita income is \$25 a month and many people toil as farmers for feudal landlords.

Despite the retreat of communism elsewhere, including in Mao Zedong's homeland of China, rebel leaders are drawn to Mao's model of a rural peasant uprising. They consider it better suited to Nepal than the kind of urban workers' revolt preached by the Marxists of the former Soviet Union.

## Lanka frees rebel prisoners as Tigers head for truce talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil rebels flew out yesterday to attend crucial peace talks as the Colombo government freed four guerrilla suspects in a goodwill gesture, officials said.

S. P. Thamilselvan, head of the political wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led a 12-member guerrilla entourage to Geneva, officials close to the peace process said.

The first face-to-face meeting between the two sides in three years, during which Sri Lanka slipped dangerously back towards war, was due to begin in Geneva on Wednesday and focus only on a troubled ceasefire.

Four LTTE suspects were released on bail in the north-eastern port district of Trincomalee as part of a behind-the-scenes deal, said an official who declined to be named.

"They had been in custody for four months," he said. "They were taken before a magistrate today and granted bail. This is part of a deal worked out behind the scenes."

The LTTE was expected to reciprocate the gesture by releasing a Sri Lankan police officer they have held since September, the source said, adding that the Tigers could also soon free a constable.

A Sri Lanka government delegation, due to travel to Geneva at the weekend, held a final meeting with a cross section of political parties Friday, officials said.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who has sought a consensus among parties represented in parliament on the issue, also attended.

The two-day Geneva meeting arranged by peace broker Norway and hosted by Switzerland will be the first high-level contact between the two sides since the Tigers, who control large areas of the north and east of Sri Lanka, pulled out of peace talks in April 2003.

The truce came under pressure following a spike in violence in December, but the bloodshed was dramatically reduced after both sides agreed on January 25 to hold talks.

## Amnesty calls for sanctions to end abuses in Nepal

REUTERS, New Delhi

International sanctions against the government of Nepal's King Gyanendra must be considered in a bid to end human rights abuses and restore democracy, the head of Amnesty International said yesterday.

"It might be assumed that because it is a small country the world will forget Nepal and the king can do whatever he wants," Secretary General Irene Khan, told Reuters. "I think the message that must go out to the king is that he cannot."

"We need to think of other ways of turning up the pressure on the regime," she said in an interview.

Khan suggested targeted sanctions, travel restrictions or the seizure of assets. "But whatever happens needs to be targeted otherwise it will be the people not the king and his cronies who will suffer," she said.

Khan met with Gyanendra, who she described as isolated from reality, a year ago, just days after he seized power, sacking the multi-party government and suspending some civil liberties.

The monarch said the move was necessary to crush a 10-year revolt by Maoist rebels that has killed more than 13,000 people.

The war has imposed a terrible cost on the Himalayan nation, tucked between Asian giants India and China.

Human rights groups accuse soldiers and Maoist rebels of large-scale human rights abuses including disappearances, kidnappings, torture and the killing of civilians during a 10-year-old conflict, which has killed more than 13,000 people.

The also accuse the army of arbitrary arrests and rape, and the rebels of extortion.

The Nepali army says 161 soldiers have been punished for rights violations in the last three years, accused of rape, killing of civilians and using unnecessary force.

routine abuses, but admit individual mistakes and insist wrongdoers are punished.

United Nations human rights observers were posted in Kathmandu last year, and Khan said a meeting of the UN's Human Rights Commission due in March should consider "expanding and extending" the mission as at the moment its writ barely extends beyond Kathmandu.

The observers had made a difference, Khan said, but "in terms of the impunity of the military -- that remains unaddressed".

The message needed to go out that Gyanendra's is a pariah regime, she said, and the world had to stand united and punish the regime, she said, adding that the Maoists must also be held to account for their widespread abuses.

"The king is talking about creating democracy but the UK suspended military aid, including non-military supplies, to the country's poorly equipped army."

Khan said that in that the Indian government had assured her it would continue to pressure the king, but described the American position as "ambiguous".

While the US government has strongly criticised the king, its reaction has been tempered by fears that isolating the monarch could lead to a Maoist takeover.

Civic polls held this month, designed to show Nepalis and the world the king was serious about holding democratic elections next year, backfired with an unusually low turnout seen as a rejection of his power grab.

Hundreds of politicians and activists were detained by security forces, and the UN estimates that 800 political prisoners are in custody.

"The king is talking about creating democracy but democracy is not just about ballots. Democracy is about having a vibrant civil society, a free media and the rule of law," Khan said.

"What the king is seeking to create is not democracy but a distorted version of it."

For their part, the rebels deny accusations of



Former US president Bill Clinton shakes hands with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) prior to a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Clinton arrived in Pakistan to visit survivors of last year's massive earthquake and to launch a health project there, officials said.

## Senior German official calls for closure of Guantanamo

AFP, AP, Berlin/United Nations

The German government's coordinator for relations with the United States yesterday urged the immediate closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison camp.

"It will serve the interests of the United States to close Guantanamo as soon as possible, in fact immediately," Karsten Voigt told Info-Radio.

Voigt's call came as German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair for talks in which the controversial US prison camp in Cuba was expected to be raised.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday said the United States should close the prison at Guantanamo Bay for terror suspects as soon as possible, backing a key conclusion of a UN-appointed independent panel.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan rejected the call to shut the camp, saying the military treats all detainees humanely and "these are dangerous terrorists that we're talking about."

## Indo-US N-deal uncertain ahead of Bush visit

REUTERS, Washington

The top US negotiator on a troubled nuclear deal with India would hold new talks in New Delhi next week only if there is a chance the visit could resolve differences clouding President George W. Bush's planned South Asia trip, US officials said on Thursday.

Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, who was in India last month, has been mulling a return trip for at least a week and two US officials told Reuters the journey was likely.

Richard Boucher, nominated to head the new State Department Bureau of South Asian and Central Asian affairs, indicated the trip was still under consideration.

The nuclear deal, agreed in principle last July, would give India access to long-denied civilian nuclear technology, including fuel and reactors, and the failure to resolve key differences would mar Bush's trip to India and Pakistan in

March, officials and experts say.

The two governments are at odds over a plan to separate India's civilian and military facilities, subjecting civilian sites to international inspections while military sites remain off-limits. Some experts say the deal is falling apart.

Burns is "willing to have a new round next week if we think we have a basis for concluding ... the separation plan" that is the agreement's core, Boucher told his Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing.

Americans insist India must put more facilities under international supervision. India's powerful nuclear establishment has complained this would "shackle" its scientists and leave the country dependent on imported uranium.

"There can be a deal but it involves action on the Indian side and right now all the signals are that the Indians think the only action that needs to happen is concessions from the US," said Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute

think tank, which is close to the administration.

Aiming to quiet the controversy and set a positive tone for Bush's trip, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will discuss US-Indian relations before parliament on Feb. 20 and two days later, Bush will discuss the same topic in an Asia Society speech, US and other sources said.

The US side may want to hear what Singh has to say before Burns' New Delhi visit is announced, business sources said.

US business leaders say the deal could open the door to billions of dollars in non-nuclear and civilian nuclear-related contracts, while US officials say it commits India to play a key role in halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

Burns told the US Congress' India caucus on Wednesday that even if he went to India, agreement on the separation plan is uncertain, a participant told Reuters.