

Sino-Pak leaders take a vow to boost ties

13 accords signed

AFP, AP, Beijing

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao pledged yesterday to step up economic and trade relations with Pakistan, but expressed concern over the safety of Chinese citizens working and living in the neighbouring nation.

"Both sides should explore new areas of commerce and continue to raise the level of trade cooperation," Wen was quoted by state television as telling visiting Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

"China will encourage its enterprises to step up investment in Pakistan."

But Wen raised concerns over the safety of Chinese nationals following the murder of three Chinese engineers last week in the southwestern restive province of Baluchistan.

"I hope Pakistan will adopt measures to guarantee the person-

nel safety and property of Chinese in Pakistan," Wen said.

Musharraf, on the third day of a five-day visit, welcomed additional Chinese investment in Pakistan, and reiterated his pledge to improve the safety of Chinese in his country, the report said.

Following talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao on Monday, the two sides signed 13 agreements, including pacts covering trade, military relations and an energy cooperation framework agreement.

As with all 13 agreements signed Monday, few details about the defence pact were immediately available.

The two countries already jointly build JF-17 Thunder fighter planes.

Another of the pacts covered energy cooperation. China has helped Pakistan set up a nuclear power plant, and the two recently started work on a second in the country's east.

According to Chinese press reports, the energy agreement is based on a possible natural gas pipeline between Iran and China which could transit Pakistan.

Although officials refused to comment on the agreement, Musharraf told Hu on Monday that Pakistan was ready to become an "energy corridor in the region."

"We hope the Chinese side can fully use Pakistan's geographic advantages and use Pakistan as a trade and energy corridor in the region," Musharraf was quoted as saying.

Trade between the two countries rose to 4.26 billion dollars last year from 3.06 billion dollars in 2004, according to Chinese government statistics.

China has long been one of Pakistan's strongest allies and provides it with development funding and assistance.



Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (R) meets Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in Beijing yesterday.

Tigers ready for truce talks today

AFP, Geneva

The United States considers them "reprehensible terrorists", the European Union will not receive them but the Sri Lankan government has little choice but to sit down for talks with the Tamil Tigers.

"We are talking to them only because of their military power," said a member of the Sri Lankan delegation due to hold talks today with the rebels in Geneva.

"They have bombed their way to Geneva," said the official, who declined to be named.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by a 51-year-old soft-spoken ethnic Tamil, has emerged as one of the world's deadliest guerrilla outfits, known for its trademark suicide bombings that rival those of al-Qaeda.

Unlike the fundamentalist group of Osama bin Laden, the Tigers are not driven by religious ideology but by their goal of independence for ethnic minority Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The Tigers cannot travel as an official delegation to any EU member state, as the bloc imposed

sanctions following the August assassination of the island nation's foreign minister, for which the rebels were held responsible.

So the talks are being hosted by Switzerland -- not an EU member. And Sri Lanka's peace broker is Norway, also not an EU state.

Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran has both literally and figuratively called the shots in Sri Lanka in the past three decades, losing 18,000 of his men and women in the process.

The conflict has claimed at least 60,000 lives in the island, including those of 1,200 Indian soldiers who battled unsuccessfully to disarm the rebels.

Prabhakaran has earned a reputation as a guerrilla leader capable of motivating young men and women to stage suicide attacks, the most effective weapon in his feared armoury.

And they were doing it long before al-Qaeda came on the scene.

US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns branded the LTTE a "reprehensible terrorist group" that was keeping Sri Lanka on the brink of war.



Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (R) meets with Ismail Haniya in Gaza City Monday. Abbas began talks with Hamas in Gaza City on forming a new government.

Nepali parties to step up protests

AP, Katmandu

Nepal's main opposition parties said yesterday they would step up protests against the royal government and seek freedom for hundreds of pro-democracy activists who are still in jail.

The parties have set up an alliance to coordinate protests against King Gyanendra, who took over absolute power of this Himalayan nation last year and formed a government under his chairmanship.

There have been continued street protests against the monarch's direct rule, which apparently prompted the king to appeal for talks earlier this week. The parties rejected the call.

"We were successful in foiling the king's plans to hold municipal elections earlier this month. Now our focus will be to come up with plans to force the king to give up power he

grabbed," said Krishna Sitaula, spokesman of Nepali Congress, the largest party in Nepal.

The government has detained hundreds of politicians and activists to stop the opposition parties from foiling the Feb. 8 municipal elections.

Despite the arrest, the opposition was able to keep most of the voters and candidates away from polling. They had sought to boycott the vote because they said it was stacked toward the king's allies and an attempt by the monarch to legitimize his direct rule over Nepal.

The opposition said they would file cases in court to seek the release of the hundreds of politicians and activists who are still in jail. The Supreme Court and lower courts have been ordering the government to free dozens of jailed politicians and activists, including 17 ordered freed on Monday.

16 sentenced to death for attack on Pak general

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani court yesterday sentenced 16 members of an al-Qaeda-linked militant group to death for a 2004 attack on a top general in Karachi that killed 11 people.

The extremists from Jund Allah, or Army of God, opened fire on the car of General Ahsan Saleem Hayat, the then corps commander of Karachi, as he drove through the restive southern city in his motorcade on June 10, 2004.

Saleem, who is now deputy chief of the Pakistani army, survived the shooting but at least seven soldiers, three policemen and a passer-by died in the hail of bullets.

Eleven of the militants were present in court and another five who absconded earlier were also handed death sentences in their absence by the anti-terrorism court in Karachi.

Govts stymied in bird flu battle

AFP, Budapest

The H5N1 form of bird flu was confirmed Tuesday in Hungary, the seventh EU country afflicted with the lethal strain, even as health officials on three continents admitted that containment measures taken so far have proved largely ineffective.

"Pure stamping out will not control the epidemic," Joseph Domenech, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's chief veterinary officer told AFP. Domenech was referring to Nigeria's mass poultry slaughter programme, but had said earlier the same was true of outbreaks elsewhere.

Indeed, despite massive efforts to block the virus' advance since it first erupted in northern Nigeria two weeks ago, H5N1 was confirmed Tuesday to have spread to three more states and the capital Abuja, bringing the number of areas affected to seven.

In India, officials admitted to failings in their bird flu surveillance system after the country's first case of H5N1 was not confirmed until 25 days after chickens started dying.

A senior expert promised to conduct an internal inquiry into why it took so long for officials to be notified of the bird deaths, which began January 24 near the town of Navapur in western Maharashtra state.

Health workers there were set to complete the slaughter Tuesday of some 130,000 chickens.

European Union officials, meanwhile, continued to squabble with member nations on how best to halt the disease's spread.

The EU's Executive Commission reacted coolly Tuesday to a proposal by France and The Netherlands to vaccinate commercially raised geese, ducks and chickens, saying it was "not against the plans outright" and that it would take them under consideration.

Iran supports end to cartoon violence

AP, Brussels

Iran backed calls from other Muslim and world leaders Monday for an end to violent protests over cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM), urging calm after weeks of demonstrations that have left at least 45 people dead in the Muslim world.

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, on a visit to European Union headquarters, said he and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana urged better dialogue between the Muslim world and the West over respect and tolerance.

"We accepted to cooperate with each other to calm down the situation, not to offend the values, religious values in particular from one side, and freedom of expression from the other side some kind of balance," Mottaki told reporters.

"We should try to cool down the situation. We do not support any violence."

Pope Benedict XVI also tried to soothe the tensions Monday, saying religious symbols must be respected but violence can never be justified.

Malaysia's prime minister warned that mistrust and fear of Islam is growing everywhere in the West.

In Afghanistan, where 11 people were killed in three days of protests earlier this month, about 2,000 students protested Monday, shouting "Long live Osama!" burning Danish and American flags and photos of President Bush.

In Indonesia, about 100 protesters shouting "Allahu Akbar" burned a Danish flag in Java province, a day after protesters attacked the American Embassy in the capital, Jakarta.

Thailand to extradite Bangladeshi for crimes

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand will extradite a German man wanted for bank robberies in his home country and a Bangladeshi man for carrying fake passports, Thai police said yesterday.

Romuaid Mariusz Wanaotowicz, 49, is wanted for an unknown number of German bank robberies totalling 5.0 million euros (5.9 million dollars), police said.

A Bangladeshi man, who police said took one name, Sayed, was arrested in Bangkok late Monday for allegedly carrying five counterfeit Indian passports and one fake French one.

He also had a credit card bearing his photograph but with the name of Damak Bin Hassan, police said.

US expects more attacks in Afghanistan

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The US military expects increased "atrocities" in Afghanistan by rebels opposed to the new government, the top American commander in the insurgency-ravaged country said yesterday.

At a ceremony marking the transfer of command of the nearly 20,000 US-led counter-insurgency coalition, General Karl Eikenberry said that US troops had had "extraordinary" successes in Afghanistan but faced considerable challenges.

"We can anticipate that there will be more fighting in the months ahead," Eikenberry said at the ceremony attended by Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak and other top military officials.

"The enemy will increasingly resort to atrocities in an effort to

attack the Afghan people and their international partners," he said.

There has been a recent surge in suicide blasts, car bombings and killings by rebels linked to insurgents from the Taliban government removed from power four years ago. US soldiers have been in Afghanistan since leading the operation that toppled the Taliban in late 2001.

Eikenberry told the incoming 10th Mountain Division, which takes over from the Southern European Task Force that headed the coalition for a year, that they "had a tough mission ahead".

The general said the new unit was also arriving at a time of important transition, with the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) due to take over from the coalition in the south, a hotbed of the insurgency.

India opens rebuilt Kashmir bridge

REUTERS, Kaman Post

Areconstructed bridge, which links the Indian and Pakistani parts of Kashmir across a Himalayan stream, was thrown open on Monday.

The 210-feet long Aman Setu or "Peace Bridge" was wrecked by last October's devastating South Asia earthquake, which killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistani Kashmir and around 1,300 in the Indian part of the Himalayan region.

"The bridge is complete...I am sure within the next two months we should be ready for trade on both sides," Ghulam Nabi Azad, chief minister of India's Jammu and Kashmir state, said after inaugurating the white steel bridge.

Some Pakistani officials and soldiers watched the inaugural ceremony from across the military Line of Control (LoC) on the other side of the bridge.

No one crossed the bridge on Monday, which was reconstructed by Indian army.

The bridge, which connects a 170-km mountainous highway between the capitals of India and Pakistani Kashmir, was opened in April 2005 after two countries launched a historic bus service, linking the divided region for the first time in almost 60 years.

The bridge's opening was part of a wider peace process that the two countries launched in January, 2004 which has seen more sporting, commercial and transport links as well as people-to-people contacts and eased tensions between the nuclear rivals.

Azad told reporters only 391 people from Indian Kashmir have travelled by the fortnightly bus to Pakistani side since its launch and 400 from Pakistani Kashmir have travelled to the Indian sector during the same period.

"Earlier, there was an impression that there is a lot of enthusiasm on both sides to meet (each other) but that has not been the case. The number (of travellers) is very low," Azad said, without giving any reason.

The 742-km Line of Control divides Kashmir and Kashmiris between India and Pakistan, who have fought two of their three wars over the scenic region since 1947.

Although ties have improved, New Delhi still accuses Islamabad of abetting Muslim militants fighting its rule in the region, a charge Pakistan denies.

More than 45,000 people have been killed in the separatist revolt in Jammu and Kashmir - mainly Hindu India's only Muslim-majority state - since 1989.



Members of a special Malaysian rescue team in blue coveralls insert probes into the ground yesterday to detect any signs of life beneath the mud that obliterated the central Philippine village of Guinsaugon.

Saudi tabloid closed for printing cartoons

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi tabloid was shut down Monday after it printed cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) as part of a campaign for more action against Denmark, where the drawings first appeared, a newspaper employee said.

"The ministry of information informed us that they decided to shut down the paper until further notice and that's why the paper did not come out today," the employee with Shams newspaper told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Shams printed the caricatures three weeks ago alongside an interview with popular Saudi cleric Salman al-Awdah who has been a key proponent of widening a boycott of Denmark and other countries where the cartoons were printed.

Shams first appeared in December and became an instant hit with the country's youth for its daring style and its focus on social and economic issues.

Like other media in the ultra-conservative kingdom, the paper is subject to the scrutiny of the ministry of information.

A private Islamic Saudi satellite channel Al-Majd has also broadcast the prophet cartoons with the same goal of stepping up the boycott.