

BURNS SAYS

Differences remain on India-US nuke deal

AFP, New Delhi

Washington and New Delhi may not be able to resolve differences over a groundbreaking nuclear deal before US President George W. Bush visits India next week, an official warned yesterday.

The inking of the pact, which would give New Delhi access to long-denied advanced nuclear technology was being touted as the highlight of Bush's three-day trip to India, starting March 1.

"We simply don't know whether we will have an agreement before President Bush's visit. We are trying our best," said US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, who is in New Delhi to prepare the ground for the presidential visit.

"Both of us want to complete these negotiations but there are still some remaining differences between us and those differences need to be worked out," Burns told reporters after talks here with Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran.

He described his exchanges with Saran as "good" but stressed, "There are still remaining differences."

The two governments are known to differ sharply on a key clause of the proposed deal — the separation of India's nuclear facilities.

Washington says India must put its "fast breeder" reactor programme, which can be used to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons, on a list of civilian facilities to be placed under international supervision.

Indian scientists however say

that this step will compromise the country's strategic interests.

The scientific adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh weighed in on Wednesday by saying outright India would not open the facility for international inspections.

"Who said we are going to put the fast breeder reactors in the civilian side? We cannot and will not do so," scientific adviser C.N.R. Rao told the Press Trust of India.

"We will accept only whatever is good for India ... The deal cannot be forced on us. The country's interest will be protected," Rao said.

India's junior foreign minister Anand Sharma also told parliament Thursday that India would separate its facilities "voluntarily", and that the exercise would be based on the

country's "national interests".

Indian media reports Thursday quoted unnamed government officials as saying that India was likely to tell Burns it would not place more than 32 facilities under safeguards compared to the 60 facilities Washington wants on the list.

New Delhi would also agree to international safeguards for its fast-breeder reactors but not before 2010, the reports said.

Burns, who arrived in New Delhi late Wednesday, also held talks with junior foreign minister Sharma Thursday and was to call on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the evening, an Indian official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Joint Secretary of the Communication Ministry Firdaus Alam (R) and Afghan Deputy Minister for Policy and Planning at the Ministry of Transport Mohammad Hashim Waez Zada (L) shake hands after signing an agreement in Islamabad yesterday. The two sides agreed to start a trial bus service between the Pakistani bordering city of Peshawar and Afghanistan's eastern city of Jalalabad from March 15.

'Rebel infiltration into Kashmir falls' 10 killed ahead of talks

AFP, New Delhi

India said the number of separatist militants entering revolt-hit Indian Kashmir from rival Pakistan dropped by more than half in 2005, media reports published said.

In violence seven Kashmiri militants, two Indian security personnel and a woman were killed in Kashmir ahead of talks called by India's premier on the disputed region, police said yesterday.

Three militants and an Indian soldier were killed during a gun battle in the southern district of Udhampur late Wednesday, a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the main city in Indian-administered Kashmir.

"Another soldier was critically injured during the fighting," he said, adding that four rebels and a policeman were killed in two separate gun battles in the neighbouring district of Poonch.

New Delhi has been pressing Islamabad to halt rebel infiltration from Pakistan and areas under its control as part of an ongoing peace drive aimed at ending their feud over divided Kashmir. The Kashmir issue has sparked off two of the three wars between the nuclear powers.

"The estimated number of terrorists who infiltrated through the Indo-Pak border in Jammu and Kashmir was 231 in 2005 and 11 in 2006 till February 15," the United News of India quoted Home Minister Shivraj Patil as telling parliament on Wednesday.

That represented a drop of 54 percent in 2005, Patil was quoted as saying.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training militants and sending them across the border to help insurgents who have been battling New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir since 1989.

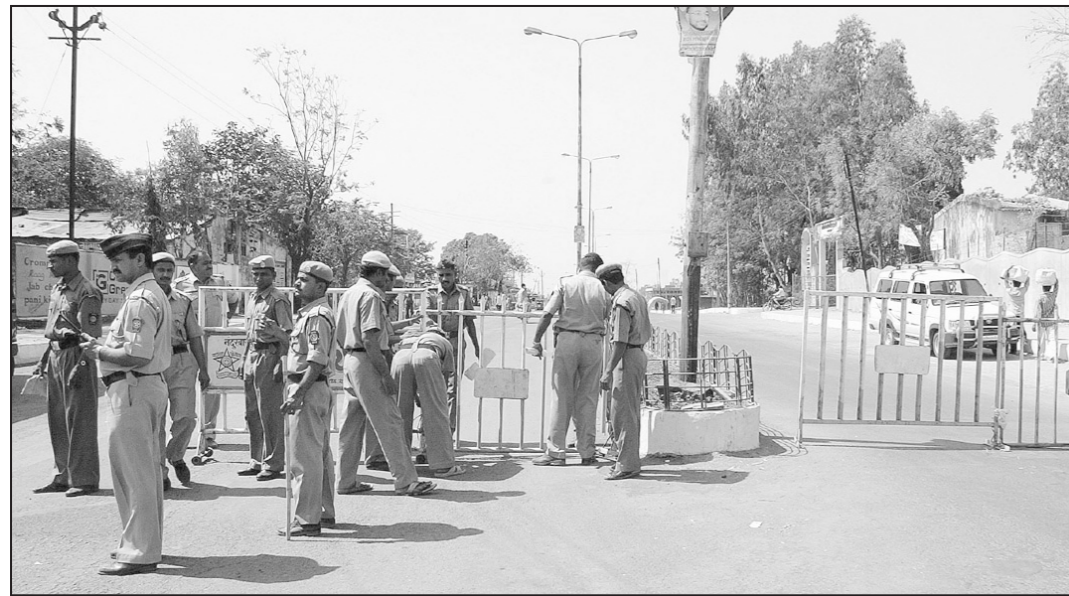


PHOTO: AFP

Indian policemen put up a checkpoint at the entry of Navapur in the Nandurbar district of western Maharashtra yesterday. Health authorities in India were setting up checkpoints to stop people leaving their villages around the bird flu-hit town of Navapur as fears began easing that the deadly virus may have spread to humans.

Bush to push for end to Kashmir conflict

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush said Wednesday he would push the leaders of India and Pakistan to resolve the long-standing Kashmir issue during his maiden visit to the South Asian nations next week.

"I will encourage them to address this important issue," Bush said ahead of his meetings with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Noting that the two nuclear powers were engaged in talks on the border conflict that had sparked two of their three wars, Bush said they "now have an historic opportunity to work toward lasting peace."

"For too long, Kashmir has been a source of violence and distrust

between these two countries," Bush said in an address to the US-based Asia Society. "America supports a resolution in Kashmir that is acceptable to both sides."

Later, at separate roundtables with Indian and Pakistani reporters, Bush took pains to clarify that he meant "all parties" -- Indians, Pakistanis and the inhabitants of Kashmir.

India and Pakistan both claim the scenic Himalayan region in its entirety but administer it in part.

India accuses Pakistan of helping the insurgency in Kashmir. Pakistan denies the charge but admits extending moral, political and diplomatic support to Kashmiris waging what it terms a "freedom struggle".

Pressure on both parties to take peace path

Lankan truce talks expose gulf of differences

AFP, Geneva

Talks between Sri Lanka's warring parties entered a second and final day yesterday as foreign pressure mounted on both sides to show flexibility and save the island's troubled peace process.

Although negotiators from the Sri Lankan government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sat down at the table, their uncompromising stands were putting the entire ice-breaking initiative at risk, diplomats said.

The final round got underway after Sri Lanka's key international financial backers -- the US, Japan, the European Union and Norway -- asked the two sides to be more accommodating.

"We urge parties to approach the opportunity with an open and flexible attitude," said the quartet known as "Co-Chairs" in a statement issued in Washington.

The four led efforts in June 2003 to help raise 4.5 billion dollars in foreign aid pledges to rebuild Sri Lanka and much of the assistance is linked to progress in peace efforts.

Peace broker Norway managed to clinch a deal on January 25 with both parties agreeing to end a three-

year deadlock in the peace drive, fixing neutral Switzerland as the venue for talks.

The last time the government and Tigers met before the Celigny talks kicked off on Wednesday was in Hakone, Japan in March 2003.

The chilly Alpine climate here failed to cool the hot heads at the table, according to officials and diplomats associated with the process.

The talks at an 18th-century chateau in this peaceful village near Geneva touched on the emotive issues of sovereignty and national security, with the new Sri Lankan government questioning the legality of the ceasefire arranged by Norway four years ago.

"There is no development to report," a Sri Lankan government official said after their chief spokesman Rohitha Bogollagama abruptly cancelled a press briefing scheduled following the first day's talks on Wednesday evening.

However, in Colombo, government spokesman Anura Priyadarshana Yapa said Thursday's session would decide "which way it will go."

"On a positive side, the head of our delegation and the LTTE shook

hands before the meeting and I think it's a good sign," Yapa told reporters in Colombo.

Sources close to the talks said the two sides stuck to their guns leaving little or no room for negotiations.

Tamil sources said that Norway was making hectic diplomatic moves to secure some progress in the discussions. Since the two sides agreed in January to meet here, the scale of violence at home dipped sharply.

The parties had even swapped prisoners as a goodwill gesture ahead of Wednesday's discussions, but new tensions emerged.

The talks were to discuss the implementation of the 2002 ceasefire, but Colombo widened the scope by including human rights, recruitment of children by the Tigers and political killings.

Tiger chief negotiator Anton Balasingham made it clear Wednesday that they will not discuss a fresh truce demanded by Colombo and will only talk about implementing the existing -- one even though it is unacceptable to Colombo.