

India, Pakistan to maintain Siachen Glacier truce

Talks to continue for troops cut

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan yesterday pledged to continue a two-year ceasefire and meet again to consider troop withdrawals from the world's highest battlefield, according to a statement issued after two days of talks.

The defence secretary-level talks in New Delhi failed to produce a breakthrough on troop withdrawals from the Siachen Glacier in disputed Kashmir, but were described as friendly.

"The two sides held frank and constructive discussions in a cordial atmosphere," according to a joint statement issued by India's foreign ministry.

"They welcomed the successful continuation of the ceasefire since November 2003 and reaffirmed their desire to make it enduring. The

defence secretaries agreed to continue the discussions to resolve the Siachen issue in a peaceful manner."

Experts said the continued deadlock over Siachen, where troops regularly engaged in artillery duels before the ceasefire, would not be a setback to peace efforts formally launched in 2004 by nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

"The peace process has a wide spectrum, though the Siachen talks would have been a high-visibility item in the peace process," Indian security analyst Uday Bhaskar said. India proposes both sides formally note down the troop positions they hold on the Siachen glacier before withdrawing forces from the region, and says Islamabad's refusal to do so is stalling a deal.

The Pakistani side has not been "agreeing to the proposal for authentication of positions for quite

some time," Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee said. He said discussions would continue in further talks but no dates were announced.

Military experts estimate 7,000 Indian troops and 4,000 Pakistani soldiers are deployed on the 6,300-metre (20,700-foot) glacier, where icy temperatures, altitude and accidents have claimed more lives than combat.

Analysts say Siachen is of little strategic value but India is concerned that Pakistan might send its troops to occupy a high ridge area if it withdraws.

India wants the troop positions marked out in case Pakistan moves its soldiers in after a withdrawal deal. Islamabad, however, fears that writing down the positions would be tacit acceptance of India's claims to Siachen.

India and Pakistan each hold part of Kashmir but claim it in full. Efforts toward reaching an agreement on Siachen are made more difficult by a deadly 16-year-old Islamic insurgency against New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir.

In 1999 Pakistan-backed invaders occupied the icy heights of Kargil, triggering fighting that cost hundreds of lives and brought the neighbours close to war. But there has been no fighting since late 2003 when a ceasefire took effect along the de facto border dividing the Himalayan region.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf this year urged India to withdraw troops from three Kashmiri cities and Siachen as a demilitarisation gesture.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) and Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad are pictured at the roundtable conference with regional politicians in the capital Srinagar yesterday. A general strike, boycott and more violence greeted Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as he arrived in Kashmir but he defended two days of peace talks here as a "serious initiative".

MONEY-LAUNDERING Benazir faces fresh Swiss questioning

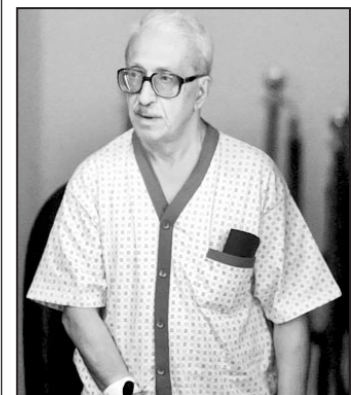
AFP, Geneva

Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto faced a new round of questioning yesterday by a Swiss magistrate who is investigating claims that she laundered millions of dollars in bribes.

"It's just a routine hearing," said Benazir Bhutto's lawyer Alec Reymond before the meeting with investigating magistrate Vincent Fournier in Geneva, adding that there had been no new developments in the case.

Benazir has been under investigation in Switzerland since 1997.

She was formally charged in 2004 over the alleged money-laundering through Swiss bank accounts of 11.7 million dollars in purported bribes paid by companies seeking customs inspection contracts.



Tareq Aziz takes stand for Saddam

REUTERS, Baghdad

Former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz took the stand to testify for Saddam Hussein as the ousted president's trial resumed on Wednesday.

Aziz, the first defence witness for Saddam at his trial for crimes against humanity, was once the international public face of the toppled leader's regime and one of his closest aides.

Aziz, whose family earlier this year said he was seriously ill, looked tired as he testified in the courtroom in Baghdad's heavily-fortified Green Zone where Saddam and his seven co-defendants are standing trial. Aziz is not among those accused.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian schoolgirls watch Fatah Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades' dissidents march in the streets of the Gaza Strip yesterday as they declare their allegiance to Hamas security forces. The 1,000 Fatah defectors are loyal to Khaled Mussa Abu Hilal, an ex-Fatah official who went to work for the Hamas government shortly after the Islamists won elections in January. The Fatah Central Committee promptly expelled Abu Hilal.

Gujarat cinemas to boycott Aamir Khan's film over riot remarks

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

Cinemas in Gujarat plan to boycott a new film starring Aamir Khan after he criticised the regional government over recent communal riots.

Authorities in Gujarat are also angry about outspoken film star's criticism of a massive dam that will eventually displace thousands of people.

"Aamir's remarks have hurt and upset people of Gujarat. We do not want to release his film," said Harish Patel, president of Gujarat Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association.

But some cinema owners admit that the decision to black out Khan's latest film, "Fanaa", was prompted by fears that government-backed protesters could attack their theatres.

"We do not want the property of cinema halls to be damaged, nor do we want people coming to other movies harassed in any manner," said Jayanti Sagar, owner of a cinema in Ahmedabad.

Strike, violence greet Manmohan in Kashmir

PM defends peace talks as 'serious'

AFP, Srinagar

A general strike, a boycott and more violence greeted Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as he arrived in Kashmir yesterday, but he defended two days of peace talks here as a "serious initiative".

Police said at least three civilians and two paramilitary troopers were wounded when a grenade was thrown in a residential area of Srinagar where the peace talks were scheduled for later in the day.

The streets of the state summer capital were deserted after headline separatists called the strike which closed shops, businesses, schools and banks.

Troops arrested separatist leaders Sayeed Ali Geelani and Javed Mir to foil street protests and barricaded intersections amid fears of further attacks by Kashmiri rebels who have vowed to disrupt the premier's roundtable, a police spokesman said.

Even the main moderate separatist alliance declared a boycott of

the talks as did India's leading opposition, the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

With the federal government presenting the roundtable as an essential plank in the search for peace in Kashmir, Singh's spokesman defended the move.

"This is a serious, well thought-out initiative to try and get to a meeting ground and this is not drama or a public spectacle," Sanjaya Baru told reporters.

"This is an ongoing process and not just a one-time affair," he said, adding the roundtable aimed at offering an opportunity to disparate separatist and political groups of Kashmir to come up with their own peace proposals.

The talks were to begin in the afternoon and continue Thursday, but the boycott by moderate separatists and violence by Islamic hardliners cast a shadow over the effort to halt the uprising that has claimed more than 44,000 lives since 1989.

The talks come amid a peace

process initiated in January 2004 between South Asian nuclear rivals India and Pakistan, whose troops have faced off across a ceasefire line in Kashmir since 1948.

Militants opposed to peace talks with India stepped up their violent campaign in the build-up to Singh's visit, killing seven people and wounding 22 in an attack on a political rally in Srinagar on Sunday.

A suicide bomber then blew himself up and wounded more than two dozen soldiers Tuesday when he rammed a car filled with explosives into a military bus near Srinagar airport.

The Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella of moderate separatist groups that met Singh last month to discuss the possible release of political prisoners, has labelled the Srinagar event a "futile exercise."

Kashmir's main opposition National Conference party also threatened to boycott the talks but Hindus in the Muslim-majority state said they would participate.

European nations draw up compromise for Iran

AP, London

Key European nations put finishing touches Tuesday on a proposal meant to enlist the support of Russia and China for possible UN Security Council sanctions against Iran should Tehran refuse to abandon uranium enrichment, diplomats said.

The compromise which would drop the automatic threat of military action if Iran remains defiant is part of a proposed basket of incentives meant to entice Iran to give up enrichment, a possible pathway to nuclear arms. It also spells out the penalties if it does not.

France, Britain and Germany discussed the final form of the package Tuesday ahead of submission for hoped-for approval Wednesday at a formal meeting of the five permanent Security Council members and Germany.

If accepted, the compromise would resolve wrangling within the Security Council since it became actively

involved in March, two months after Iran's file was referred to it by the 35-nation board of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Russia and China have opposed calls by America, Britain and France for a resolution threatening sanctions and enforceable by military action.

The compromise proposal is meant to break that deadlock, said the diplomats, who demanded anonymity in exchange for discussing the package with The Associated Press.

If Iran remains defiant, the proposal calls for a Security Council resolution imposing sanctions under Chapter VII, Article 41 of the UN Charter. But it avoids any reference to Article 42 which is the trigger for possible military action to enforce any such resolution.

And in an additional reassurance to Moscow and Beijing, it specifically calls for new consultations among the five permanent Security Council members on any further steps against Iran. That is meant to dispel

past complaints by the Russians and Chinese that once the screws on Iran are tightened, it would automatically start a process leading to military involvement.

The proposed language represents compromise by the United States, Britain and France, which for weeks had called for a full Chapter VII resolution automatically carrying the threat of military action if ignored by Iran.

Still, it was unclear whether the changes would be enough to satisfy Russia and China at the six-nation meeting Wednesday because any such resolution would still declare Iran a threat to international peace something also opposed by both Moscow and Beijing. Russia and China also have until recently spoken out against possible sanctions on Tehran, their economic and strategic partner.

100 feared dead in Thai floods

AFP, Bangkok

Relief teams yesterday pulled more corpses from receding floodwaters in northern Thailand, where officials fear about 100 people were killed in floods and mudslides.

"One hundred dead is our preliminary estimate, but we are still receiving reports of missing people," Suksan Wanaputi, acting governor of the hardest-hit province of Uttaradit, told AFP.

Mudslides blocked roads to Lab Lae district, where many of the victims are believed to have been swept away by the floodwaters or buried in the mud in the mountainous region, he said.

Up to two meters (6.6 feet) of water still covered the streets in parts of the province, he added.

So far 30 bodies had been pulled from the mud and water that covered roads and homes, while 77 people were reported missing and feared dead, the disaster management agency said.

"We think that the number of

dead and missing are likely to rise," a disaster official told AFP.

The nearby provinces of Nan, Phrae, Lampang and Sukhothai were also hit by the floods after unusually early monsoon rains drenched northern Thailand at the weekend.

Some 1,200 people have been evacuated, while more than 75,000 have suffered damage either to their homes or their farms, the disaster agency said.

At least 168 homes were destroyed in the floods, while 25 schools, temples or government buildings were damaged, it added.

Some 1,000 people who had been stranded at the Den Chai train station in Phrae province were rescued late Tuesday and brought to Bangkok, the State Railway of Thailand said.

But services on lines running north from Bangkok to the city of Chiang Mai were suspended for a second day, railways spokesman Monthskarn Srivilasa said.



PHOTO: AFP

Western tourists along with locals aboard a Chiang Mai-bound train left stranded at railway station stay on the top of train in Thailand hardest-hit northern Uttaradit province Tuesday. Up to 100 people were feared dead in floods and mudslides in northern Thailand as rescue teams struggled to clear roads to reach the hardest-hit areas.

Bush backs Olmert plan to reshape Israeli border

AFP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert basked in the aftermath of his first meeting since taking office with US President George W. Bush, who backed his plan to reshape the Mideast and pledged to protect the Jewish state from Iran.

Together with the tangible outcome of Tuesday's six-hour summit at the White House, Olmert will return home on Wednesday with the knowledge that Israel's special and vital friendship with its chief ally has been reaffirmed.

In a briefing following the summit, Olmert told reporters that "I am very very pleased with the contents of our talks, with the things I heard and with the president's statement. His words were very clear and very impressive."

Olmert's three-day visit came only several weeks after forming a coalition government led by his centrist Kadima party, which vowed to end Israel's presence in most areas of the occupied West Bank by 2010 even without Palestinian agreement.

The strong words of support that Bush offered to Olmert's plan, albeit on condition that he first attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with the Palestinian, gave a major boost to Olmert's future efforts to assure national and international support.

"I would call them bold ideas," Bush told reporters Tuesday. "The prime minister's ideas could be an important step toward the peace we both support."

Bush said that Olmert's ideas, even if carried out unilaterally, could lead to his vision of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel under the auspices of the internationally-backed road map peace plan.

But he also reiterated his stand that Israel should not wait forever for a Palestinian partner in negotiations, especially since the radical Hamas movement leads the Palestinian Authority government and remains adamant in its refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist and renounce violence.

Dollar a dirty word for Duma

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia's parliament gave initial approval yesterday to a draft law that will punish government ministers for saying "dollar" when they could have used the word "rouble" instead.

Backers of the law say they want to rebuild pride in the Russian currency and draw a line under the years when galloping inflation meant most people did business in dollars. Critics say it is unworkable and political posturing.

The State Duma, or lower house of parliament, backed the draft in its first reading by 384 votes, with one abstention. It must pass a further two readings but is not expected to change significantly.

"The rouble is on the move," said nationalist lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, drawing a parallel with the Soviet Red Army's victorious march across Europe at the end of World War Two. "The next stop is Berlin."

Int'l concern mounts over Lanka violence

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

Three security personnel died in a mine blast yesterday, the Sri Lankan military said, as peace broker Norway moved to salvage a collapsing ceasefire that has sparked mounting international concern.

Two soldiers and a policeman died in the Claymore mine attack blamed on the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the island's north, military officials said, while in the east the two sides exchanged mortar fire.

There were no immediate reports of casualties in the long-range mortar battle at Vavunathivu in Batticaloa district, where the guerrillas were holding the funeral of a senior field commander shot dead on Sunday.

The Tigers warned the killing of their eastern region intelligence leader, identified as Colonel Ramanan, could push them to a "major war" with government forces.

The Tigers blamed the military while the government denied any hand in the slaying.

More than 600 people have been killed since violence began escalat-

ing in December, according to an AFP tally. More than half the victims were civilians.

Troops, police, Tamil Tigers and civilians have died in explosions, shootings, naval engagements and other action despite a Norwegian-brokered truce in force since February 2002.

Norway's peace envoy flew to Sri Lanka yesterday for a fresh round of separate meetings with government officials and the Tamil Tigers, but the rebels played down hopes of breaking a deadlock over stalled peace talks.

The government hopes special envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer and Norwegian peace mediator Erik Solheim, due to join him on Friday, can cajole the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) back to talks they pulled out of indefinitely amid an upsurge in violence.

But as the Tigers prepared to bury one of their top commanders in the restive east after a weekend assassination they blame on the army, they say any peace talks are a long way off.

NEW AUDIO TAPE Laden claims lead role in 9/11 attacks

AFP, Paris

Osama bin Laden said he masterminded the September 11 attacks and convicted Frenchman Zacarias Moussaoui had no part in them, according to an audio recording released Tuesday.

"I am responsible for assigning the roles of the 19 brothers to conduct these conquests and I did not order Zacarias to be with those on this mission," said the recording released on the Internet.

In Washington, a US official said the intelligence service had no reason to doubt the authenticity of the recording.

Moussaoui, a 37-year-old Frenchman of Moroccan origin, is the only man convicted over the September 11, 2001 attacks. He was sentenced this month to a court in Alexandria, Virginia to life imprisonment.

"Confessions that he was asked to participate in these conquests are null and void," said the recording on the As-Sahab Internet site, frequently used by al-Qaeda.

60 suspected Taliban, 5 troops killed in fighting

AFP, Kandahar

Sixty suspected Taliban and five members of the Afghan security forces were killed in a major new clash in southern Afghanistan, a top Afghan army commander and police said yesterday.

The fighting, the latest in a dramatic upsurge of violence in Afghanistan that has left around 350 people dead, erupted Tuesday after an Afghan army patrol came under attack in volatile Uruzgan province.

"We launched a massive search and clean-up operation after the attack in which our troops spotted and killed 60 Taliban," said General Rahmatullah Raufi, who commands Afghan forces in the south.

Four soldiers were killed, he said. A policeman also died in the attack, the ministry of interior said.

Three soldiers and three police were also wounded in the fighting near Tirin Kot, the provincial capital, Raufi said.

Uruzgan sees regular clashes between security forces and mili-

tants loyal to the ultra-Islamist Taliban regime that was overthrown by a coalition led by the United States in late 2001.

A US soldier with the coalition was killed and seven wounded in a battle in the province on Friday, the coalition said. Twenty "enemy fighters" were killed in battle, it said.

Afghanistan has in the past week seen some of the worst fighting since the fall of the Taliban, as the militia steps up its four and a half year insurgency, backed by other Islamic outfits including al-Qaeda.

There are more than 30,000 foreign troops from nearly 40 countries in Afghanistan to help the government put down the revolt and extend its authority to stabilise the country, which has suffered conflict for the past 30 years.

The insurgency traditionally heats up when the weather warms but military analysts have said the violence is particularly bad this year with the Taliban appearing better organised than in the past.