

India won't accept changes to nuclear deal with US

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government said yesterday it would not be cowed by the US into changing the terms of their civilian nuclear deal, amid concerns Washington was trying to cap India's atomic weapons programme.

"The prime minister has said India will not accept any additional conditionalities," junior foreign minister Anand Sharma told parliament, as opposition parties, the government's own allies and atomic scientists joined a growing chorus against attempts by some US lawmakers to change the accord.

"Whatever agreement India will sign will be within the templates of the July 18 agreement and the

March 2 agreement," Sharma said, referring to two meetings between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and US President George W. Bush in Washington and New Delhi during which the deal was thrashed out.

Under the pact, India has agreed to open most of its atomic reactors to international inspection but is allowed keep pre-selected military nuclear facilities out of public scrutiny.

In return, India will be given unfettered access to previously forbidden nuclear technology to generate power to fuel its rapidly growing economy and cut back on its use of fossil fuels.

Washington has been withholding civilian nuclear know-how from India since 1974 when New Delhi

conducted its first atomic test. New Delhi conducted more tests in 1998.

The civilian nuclear deal, passed by the House of Representatives 359-68, now has to be approved by the US Senate.

However some US lawmakers are demanding a greater convergence of views between India and Washington on policies on Iran, which New Delhi considers "a civilisational friend" even though it is opposed to Tehran acquiring nuclear weapons' capability.

Some US lawmakers have also questioned whether India can be trusted with critical atomic secrets and have demanded that stringent safeguards be put in place.

'Indian TV crews aided suicide to get footage'

REUTERS, Kolkata

A group of television journalists gave a man matches and diesel to help him commit suicide in order to get dramatic footage, which was later broadcast on the news, police said yesterday.

The man died from severe burns to his body in hospital in Gaya town of Bihar on August 15, Independence Day.

Footage of the man, screaming and writhing in pain as he ran with his back on fire, was aired on several television channels. Police identified the man as Manoj Mishra.

"We have seized footage clearly showing a group of journalists handing over matches and some inflammable substance - which we later verified to be diesel - to the victim," acting Gaya police chief PK Sinha told Reuters by telephone.

Mishra, who worked as a delivery man, was upset over what he said was a large sum of money owed to him by a state-run dairy farm whose milk he transported to customers, police said.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Buddhist Monks and Catholic Nuns carry placards as they join anti-war front members in a march for peace in Colombo yesterday. Troops killed more than 98 Tamil rebels when the guerrillas staged a fresh attack on Sri Lanka's Jaffna peninsula.

Pakistan frees 7 foreign al-Qaeda suspects

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani authorities yesterday freed seven foreigners who were held as al-Qaeda suspects after crossing from Afghanistan following the 2001 fall of the Taliban, a prison official said.

The men released from a jail in the northwestern city of Peshawar comprised two Algerians, two Tunisians and one each from Morocco, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, the prison's deputy chief Ajmal Khan told AFP.

Their links with the terror network were not established but they must remain in Pakistan in the care of a local charity as they still face charges of entering the country without valid travel documents, officials said.

"We have released seven foreign prisoners to implement the court order," Khan said.

A court in Peshawar, which lies close to the Afghan border, recently ordered that the seven should be handed over to a local Islamic charity, the Al-Khidmat Foundation, the prison official said.



PHOTO: AFP

A survivor of a powerful bomb blast in a crowded Hindu temple is watched over in Imphal, capital of the north-eastern state of Manipur Wednesday. At least five people were killed and 17 injured after a grenade exploded in a crowded Hindu temple during festivities marking Lord Krishna's birthday.

Manipur temple blast kills 5

REUTERS, AFP, Guwahati

The death toll in a bomb explosion at a Hindu temple in Manipur rose to five, and at least 35 people including foreign devotees were wounded, police said yesterday.

The explosion occurred near the state capital Imphal during prayers on Wednesday to celebrate the birth of the Hindu god, Krishna.

Two Americans, a French and an Iranian woman, who were at the temple run by ISKCON, the international Krishna consciousness movement, were among the injured.

An intelligence official said some unidentified people had warned ISKCON officials not to hold any functions on Wednesday, when the rest of the country marked one of its biggest festivals.

Four foreigners hurt in a grenade blast which killed four devotees at a Hindu temple in Indias Manipur state were to be flown out Thursday, an official said, as police hunted for the attackers.

Coalition forces kills 8 Afghan 'extremists' 15 Afghan medics kidnapped

AFP, Kabul/ Kandahar

Soldiers from the US-led coalition killed eight "extremists" in a firefight in eastern Afghanistan, a US military statement said yesterday.

The eight militants attacked coalition troops on Wednesday in the Asadabad district of restive Kunar province, the statement said.

"The coalition responded to the attack with small arms, machinegun fire and grenades," it added.

No coalition casualties were reported, the statement said.

The US-led coalition has concentrated on anti-insurgent operations along Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan since NATO forces took command in the south of the country on July 31.

Afghanistan's hardline Taliban movement was toppled from power by the coalition in late 2001 but has stepped up an insurgency in 2006, leading to some of the worst violence in the last five years.

Meanwhile, a medical team of 15 people, mainly doctors and nurses, was kidnapped Thursday while travelling to a refugee camp in Afghanistan's troubled southern province of Kandahar, an official said.

The medical team, employed by Kandahar's refugee department, was travelling by bus to Taliban-dominated Zairai district when unidentified men hijacked their vehicle, said refugee department official Agha Jan Nazari.

"We had a 15-member doctor team travelling to that district. Unknown people have kidnapped them and we don't know anything about their fates," he said.

"The kidnapers have not contacted us so far yet."

Manmohan wants more links across divided Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

India wants to increase transport links between the Indian and Pakistani zones of divided Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told parliament.

"Our government is for expanding flows" between the two sides, Singh told the Indian parliament's upper house during question hour.

"Whenever the opportunity arises we will take up this matter with Pakistan," he said, according to the Press Trust of India on Thursday.

Last year, the nuclear-armed neighbours launched two bus services to help reunite families living on either side of the Line of Control (LoC), a de facto border that has split the mountainous region and its people for decades.

India's junior foreign minister E. Ahamed told parliament that New Delhi proposed in January a third

transit route, linking Jammu in India and Sialkot in Pakistan, but "Pakistan has not accepted it."

The bus links are part of a slow-moving process to normalise ties between the rivals, who have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947 - two of them over Kashmir.

But the peace process, launched in 2004, has stuttered to a virtual halt since the Mumbai train bombings last month that New Delhi said were carried out with help from "elements across the border," referring to Pakistan.

Singh's support for more transport links came just two days after he called on Islamabad to honour a pledge to prevent cross-border terrorism, saying peace between the neighbours was impossible in the face of terrorist attacks.

Main Kashmiri group ready for talks

But rebels won't surrender guns

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's largest Islamic militant group, Hizbul Mujahedin, said yesterday it was not "scared" of talks with New Delhi but insisted there be no conditions such as laying down arms.

Hizbul's comments came as the region's top separatist political figure, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, said he would visit Belfast next month to study the Irish Good Friday peace deal to see if it could help resolve the Kashmir dispute.

"Hizbul Mujahedin was never scared of talks in the past nor is it against the process today," the group's spokesman, Junaid-ul-Islam, told local news agency Current News Service.

But he said if Indian leaders "were sincere they should not have put preconditions like renouncing of guns by Hizbul before the talks."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said New Delhi is willing to hold talks with any militant group as long as they first renounce violence and disarm.

"When India held talks with Naga militants such a condition was not there," said Islam, referring to a group active in Assam state.

"Hizbul wants to make it clear that the armed struggle will continue until India accepts the reality (that Kashmir is a disputed state)," Islam said.

Farooq urged talks between New Delhi and the militants but said neither side should set preconditions. He added, however, that four rounds of talks held by his moderate faction of Kashmir's separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, with New Delhi had yielded "nothing substantive."

Farooq said Hurriyat was conducting an "extensive study" of peace agreements around the world to see if any could help resolve the Kashmir dispute.

Farooq, who is also head priest or Mirwaiz of the region's main mosque, said he planned to visit Belfast in early September to study the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which largely ended political violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

"I will try to meet the parties involved and try to understand if there are any similarities between the Irish and Kashmiri problems and if that agreement can help in resolving the Kashmir dispute," Farooq said.

Buddhist monks brawl at Lanka peace rally

REUTERS, Colombo

Protesters calling for an end to recent violence in Sri Lanka found themselves brawling with hardline Buddhist monks yesterday, after a rally dubbed a "peace protest" turned unexpectedly violent.

Organisers said there were around 1,000 people in a park in the capital, Colombo, listening to a range of speakers when hardline saffron-robed monks opposed to concessions to Tamil Tiger rebels mounted the stage and erected banners.

Some more moderate Buddhist monks, protesting for peace, were already on the stage when punches were thrown. Soon, monks' robes and fists were flying, although no one was badly hurt, witnesses said.

"They were saying we should go to war," said pro-peace monk Madampawe Assagee. "We like to listen to other opinions so we let them do that but then they started fighting and we couldn't control some of our people. They tried to make it a big fight but we settled it in a few minutes."

Sri Lanka is currently embroiled in the worst fighting with the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since a 2002 truce, with many believing a two-decade civil war has resumed. Hardline monks - allies of President Mahinda Rajapakse - say the government is too soft on the rebels and want military action.

The island is dominated by the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, but is also home to Muslims as well as minority Tamils - some Hindu, some Christian. The hardline monks are violently opposed to Tiger demands for a separate Tamil homeland.

A Reuters photographer said the fight first erupted between a speaker at the rally - a former government minister - and a monk, and then turned into a wider brawl. Other religious leaders on the platform found themselves dragged into the melee.

"By force, they disrupted the protest," said Jehan Perera, head of the National Peace Council, who took part in a peace march earlier in the day but had gone by the time the fight erupted. "But I think they're the minority. Most of the people we walked past were very supportive."