

New Indian FM to put focus on neighbours

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appointed Pranab Mukherjee as the External Affairs Minister in a cabinet reshuffle on Oct 24 to put focus on neighbours.

Manmohan Singh not just filled the key portfolio that had been kept vacant for nearly 11 months but also sent a strong signal that New Delhi is going to put focus on its neighbourhood diplomacy, particularly with regard to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, analysts said.

Manmohan carried out the long-awaited reshuffle of his council of ministers on October 24 when senior leader of ruling Congress party AK Antony was named Defence Minister to replace Mukherjee and Oscar Fernandes, a loyalist of party chief Sonia Gandhi, chosen as Labour Minister.

The appointment of 71-year-old Mukherjee as Foreign Minister, a

portfolio he had held in the P V Narasimha Rao cabinet in the 1990s, means India will have a full timer in charge of the ministry after almost a year following the resignation of K Natwar Singh in the wake of UN report on Iraqi oil-for-food scam.

Mukherjee's appointment as Foreign Minister was on the cards ever since Natwar Singh was shown the door. The perception was further strengthened when Mukherjee was deputed by the Prime Minister to represent India at the UN General Assembly session in September this year.

Nevertheless, it is an open secret in Congress circles that Mukherjee was "reluctant" to move to Foreign Ministry and it took some persuasion by Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh to accept his new assignment, Congress sources said.

It is understood that Mukherjee has been assured by Congress high command that he will continue to be regarded as the senior most minister

in the cabinet and will remain the Leader of the House in Lok Sabha and be involved with various domestic political and policy formulations including chairmanship of about a dozen ministerial panels.

With his firm grip on what is going on in India's neighbourhood, Mukherjee is expected to devote more time to Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka where developments are of vital concern to India, one analyst said.

Relations with neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh, occupied a major portion of Mukherjee's first interaction with the media soon after taking charge of External Affairs Ministry on October 25.

He also hinted at focusing on economy as an integral part of New Delhi's neighbourhood policy saying peace with neighbours was necessary for India to attain 9 to 10 per cent growth.

"As we cannot alter our neigh-

bourhood, it is desirable to live with our neighbours in peace and create tension-free situation on our borders with neighbours", Mukherjee said.

To a question about terrorism, Mukherjee disagreed with a suggestion about use of "force" against it and said India has already taken up the matter with Bangladesh and suggested to Dhaka that it is in the interest of both countries that terrorist activities are curbed.

He said the issue was raised even with Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia when she had visited India in March this year.

Bangladesh is months away from general elections and New Delhi is closely monitoring the stand-off between BNP and Awami League over electoral reforms and contours of a caretaker government. Then there is the vital question of dealing with a new government in Dhaka after the elections.



Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of the Grameen Bank Dr Muhammad Yunus (R) of Bangladesh shakes hands with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso prior to their talks at Aso's office in Tokyo yesterday. Yunus is in Tokyo now on a six-day visit to Japan during which he will visit Hiroshima, centre of the country's peace movement.

Carter calls for US troops to quit Iraq next year

AFP, New Delhi

Former US Democratic president Jimmy Carter called Friday for US troops to be "totally" withdrawn from Iraq "within the next year or so".

Carter's comments come one day after the number of US soldiers killed in Iraq hit 96 in the first three and a half weeks of October, the highest monthly toll in a year.

"I would personally like to see US troops out of Iraq within the next year or so," said Carter, who won the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize.

"I don't think so far there's ever been any commitment from our government in Washington ever to totally withdraw from (the) Iraq military. I would like to see that commitment made," Carter told reporters in the Indian capital.

US President George Bush said earlier this week in Washington that US troops would not be withdrawn "until the job is down" despite concern among Americans over mounting US casualties.

Carter, who served as president from 1977-1981, said that before their withdrawal, US troops should be moved away from the Iraqi capital Baghdad.



Activists of the Social Unity Centre of India (SUCI), a pro-leftist organisation, shout anti-US slogans during a protest rally in Bangalore yesterday. The rally was organised to support North Korea's nuclear plans and to condemn UN pressure on North Korea.

Danish court acquits publishers of cartoons

AFP, Copenhagen

A Danish court on Thursday acquitted the bosses of the Jyllands-Posten newspaper who had been sued by Muslim groups for printing 12 cartoons of the Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) in September 2005.

The judge at Aarhus district court ruled the cartoons were neither offensive nor were they intended to denigrate Muslims, according to court papers.

"Even if the text accompanying the pictures could be read as being derogatory and mocking, the cartoons are not offensive," the court said.

Seven Danish Muslim groups launched legal proceedings in March against Jyllands-Posten's editor, Carsten Juste, and cultural affairs editor Flemming Rose.

They accused the paper of publishing text and cartoons which were "offensive and insulting" to the prophet.

IRAN SANCTIONS

US, Russia differ with Europeans

REUTERS, United Nations

Russia on Thursday expressed misgivings about a European draft UN resolution imposing sanctions on Iran, which the United States supports but wants to strengthen.

Russia, the United States, Britain, France, China and Germany held their first meeting on Thursday afternoon on the draft Security Council resolution, which would ban Iranian trade in nuclear materials and ballistic missiles.

But Western diplomats do not expect the six to agree until the middle of next week, at the earliest, after which the text would be circulated to the full 15-member council.

The resolution is in response to UN demands that Tehran suspend by August 31 its uranium-enrichment activities, which the West believes are a cover for bomb-making. Iran says its programme is aimed solely at energy production.

Speaking in Russia, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the European draft did not match previous agreements among the major powers seeking to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions, and predicted long negotiations before the issue is resolved.

He said the object was to "eliminate the risks of sensitive technology falling into Iran's hands" and stressed the importance of dealing with Iran through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog.

Lavrov said it appeared that the "proposed resolution clearly does not meet the tasks earlier agreed by the six."

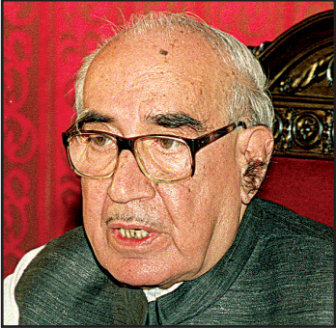
The Europeans refused, saying

they had to meet some of Russia's and China's concerns, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the talks are in progress.

But State Department spokesman Sean McCormack expressed US backing for the European draft, saying, "We have fully supported that effort from the very beginning."

He also played down differences with Russia, saying that Washington understood Moscow's fears about putting too much pressure on Iran.

"We know that the Russians have some concerns about the tactics and concerns about applying too much pressure too quickly on the Iranians. We certainly understand their point of view," McCormack told reporters in Washington.



Ex-Pak president Ishaq Khan dies

AFP, Peshawar

Former Pakistani president Ghulam Ishaq Khan died here yesterday after a protracted illness, his family said.

"He was suffering from a lung infection," his son-in-law, Anwar Saifullah, told AFP.

Saifullah added he was 91 and the main cause of his death was his old age.

Ishaq Khan took over as president after the death of late military ruler General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq in a plane crash on August 17, 1988.

He remained president until 1993.

During his tenure he dissolved the governments of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, in 1990, and Nawaz Sharif, in 1993, on different charges.

His funeral is expected in the northwestern city of Peshawar late Friday, the family said.

Bush okays Mexico border fencing

REUTERS, Washington

President George W Bush signed election-year legislation on Thursday to build 1120km of fencing along the US-Mexican border to combat illegal immigration, prompting a strong protest from Mexico.

Republicans hoped the legislation would give them a boost as they try to head off a strong Democratic attempt to take control of the US Congress in November 7 elections.

"We have a responsibility to secure our borders. We take this responsibility seriously," Bush said in a signing ceremony at the White House.

But Mexican President-elect Felipe Calderon said in Ottawa after meeting Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper that he deplored the move because "the fence doesn't resolve anything" and will cause more Mexican deaths on the border.

Tigers to push for opening key road link in talks

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels threatened yesterday to scupper future peace negotiations if the government does not agree to open the main highway to the country's restive north at talks in Geneva this weekend.

The closure of the A-9 highway to the Tamil-dominated Jaffna peninsula by the government in August after a surge in fighting between the rebels and government forces has led to hardship among many minority Tamils living in the area.

"The opening of the A-9 is the main thing under the humanitarian issue," rebel media coordinator Daya Master told Reuters by phone from Tiger-held Kilinochchi in the north.

"If they reject or don't open the A-9, (there is) no chance to continue the talks."

But a government official said the highway issue was not yet fixed as part of the talks.

two days," the official, who asked not to be quoted by name, told Reuters from Geneva.

"The agenda for the talks has not been fixed," he said, adding the government negotiating team had yet to discuss the agenda with the Norwegian facilitators.

About 1,000 people, many of them civilians, have died in a surge in fighting since July. It is the worst violence since a 2002 truce and many thousands of people have been displaced.

In sporadic attacks since Thursday, two soldiers were wounded in a claymore mine blast in the northern Vavuniya area.

In North Central province, an improvised bomb exploded near a civilian bus but there were no casualties, the military said.

On Thursday, Human Rights Watch urged both sides to protect civilians and provide designated conflict-free sanctuaries.

The government says it was forced to shut the highway because of rebel attacks. Colombo supplies

the Jaffna region regularly by ship or aircraft.

But local residents, Tamil political groups and civil society organisations complain of widespread food shortages and a possible humanitarian crisis due to the closure.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) spokesman was not upbeat about the Geneva talks.

"Our side says we are going to discuss the humanitarian issues. The government says the political issues. So far no agenda... Let's wait and see," Master said.

More than 65,000 people have been killed since 1983 in the ethnic conflict.

The LTTE is fighting for an independent homeland for the Tamils, many of whom complain of discrimination by the Sinhalese political class and the government.

Bomb kills 14 Afghans Kabul probes into civilian killing in Nato raids

AFP, Kabul

Fourteen civilians were killed in a bomb blast in southern Afghanistan Friday as the government said it believed around 25 were killed in fighting between Nato and Taliban this week.

President Hamid Karzai said there must be better coordination between Afghan and foreign troops to avoid civilians casualties, while the United Nations expressed concern about civilians being caught up in the fight against Taliban forces.

The 14 -- mostly elderly people and children -- were travelling in a minibus that was struck by a bomb in the southern province of Uruzgan, a provincial government official said.

The bus was hit just outside the provincial capital Tirm Kot, spokesman Abdul Qayom Qayom said. "Fourteen civilians, mostly elders and children, were killed in the blast and three were wounded," he said.

The blast was caused by a mine that had been planted in the road,

interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary told AFP. It was unclear who was behind the attack, he said.

Taliban insurgents are responsible for most of the regular bomb blasts -- including roadside bombings and suicide attacks -- in Afghanistan.

Officials were also trying to establish how many civilians were killed in clashes between Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) and Taliban insurgents in Kandahar province -- the birthplace of the religious movement.

The interior ministry in Kabul said around 60 people were killed in the battles late Tuesday, and more than half were insurgents.

Bashary said later about 25 of the dead appeared to have been civilians according to preliminary investigations.

An Isaf spokesman in Kandahar said it could confirm 12 civilians were killed in the skirmishes, which included a bombing raid. Isaf has already said it killed 48 insurgents.



Farooq Ahmed Dar (C) delivers a speech during a rally to welcome him back home in Srinagar yesterday. India released former top rebel commander Farooq Ahmed Dar on bail by a court in Jammu after 16 years in various jails on murder and extortion charges on October 24.



US Senator John Kerry (D-MA) signs autographs after a "Vote For Change" rally in support of Democratic congressional candidate Patrick Murphy Thursday in Newtown, Pennsylvania. Murphy, who received the Bronze Star for his military service in Iraq, is facing incumbent Mike Fitzpatrick (R-PA) in the Eighth District of Pennsylvania congressional race.

Independent voters shun Republicans

AFP, Washington

Independent voters, an important bloc of the divided US electorate, are shunning Republicans in favour of Democrats, providing what could be the decisive margin of victory in the November 7 midterm elections.

A poll this week found that independents, a sometimes unpredictable group, plan to support Democrats over Republicans by an almost two-to-one margin in congressional elections to be held in a week and a half.

Those results are worrisome for ruling Republicans because independents -- who often cast their vote based on the qualities of the individual candidate rather than party affiliation -- are key swing voters in a year in which there are many tight races.

Forty-five per cent of independents said it would be good if Democrats took control of the lower House of Representatives, 10 per cent said the opposite, and the rest said it would not matter, according to the survey by The Washington Post and ABC News.

Palestinians, Israel close to prisoner-swap deal

3 more killed in Israelis raid

AFP, Gaza City/Jenin

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya and Israel said yesterday they saw progress towards a prisoner swap that would free an Israeli soldier captured four months ago and Palestinian detainees held in the Jewish state's jails.

The optimism emerged with news that powerful Hamas politburo chief, Khaled Meshaal, was expected soon in Egypt for talks on the matter with Egyptian officials who have been the main broker in the crisis.

The soldier's release is linked to "Israeli responses to Palestinian demands and I think there is progress as the Egyptian brothers told us. They are the ones following the matter," Haniya told AFP after Friday prayers.

Nevertheless the premier, head of the Hamas-led government boycotted by Israel and the West, said he had no details about Meshaal's visit to Cairo.

"There is no more information on Khaled Meshaal's visit but contacts with the Egyptian brothers have not been interrupted," he said.

Hamas has demanded the release of some 1,000 Palestinians held in Israel in exchange for Corporal Gilad Shalit, whose capture sparked a prolonged Israeli offensive in Gaza where more than 250 Palestinians have since been killed.

An Israeli cabinet minister earlier expressed cautious optimism about the prospect of securing Shalit's release. He was seized in June by Gaza-based militants, including those from the armed wing of

Hamas.

"Being aware of all the details concerning this affair, I prefer to keep quiet. I became optimistic during my recent visit to Cairo and that I remain," Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer told army radio.

Meanwhile, three Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces near the city of Jenin in the occupied West Bank on Friday, local medical sources said.

Fadi Sabah, 24, a militant from the radical Islamic Jihad faction, and Mustapha Abu Zalat, 17, a member of a group linked to the Fatah party of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, were killed at Al-Fara, the sources said.

The third Palestinian, Ahmed Abu al-Hassan, 25, was killed at Al-Yamoun.

200 human remains found at Ground Zero

REUTERS, New York

More than 200 pieces of human remains have been found at the World Trade Centre site since the discovery of bones by workers clearing rubble from manholes sparked a new search a week ago, an official said on Thursday.

The Twin Towers in New York City were hit by hijacked passenger jets and collapsed on September 11, 2001, killing 2,749 people. Some 1,150 of the victims have either not been identified or not recovered.

A spokeswoman for New York's Chief Medical Examiner's Office said that on Thursday an additional nine pieces of bone were found, bringing the total for the week to 202 pieces, ranging from 1 inch to 12 inches in length.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has defended the clean-up of the site, although he said he was at a loss to explain why the bones had not been discovered sooner.