



Shah Rukh Khan to host India's most popular TV show

AFP, New Delhi

Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan will replace Amitabh Bachchan, India's most famous actor, as the host of the local TV version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," a report said Sunday.

The show, which was abruptly taken off air in January after Bachchan had stomach surgery, is expected to air early next year, Samir Nair, the chief executive officer of Star India channel that airs the show, told the Press Trust of India.

"We are indebted to him for what he brought to the show, but now it is time to move on and who better to hand over the baton to than Shah Rukh Khan," Nair said.

Bachchan, 64, is the biggest name in Bollywood's prolific film industry, with more than 100 movies to his credit.

Thanks to Bachchan's charisma, "Kaun Banega Crorepati" (Who wants to win 10 million rupees) has been one of the most popular shows since starting in India in 2000.

Mini-bus plunges into canal in Pakistan, 11 die

REUTERS, Multan

A mini-bus plunged into a canal, killing 11 passengers, including four children, in eastern Pakistan yesterday, after the steering on the vehicle snapped, police said.

There were 25 people aboard the mini-bus when the accident happened near Tunsia Sharif, 210 kms south-west of Multan in Punjab province.

"We have recovered 11 dead bodies, and rescued 14 others from the canal," Khalid Mehmud, a senior police officer, said, adding that the vehicle's tie-rod controlling the steering had sheared in two.

China has endorsed Indo-US nuke deal

Says Mukherjee

PTI, New Delhi

China has "endorsed" the Indo-US civil nuclear deal during the just-concluded visit of President Hu Jintao here, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee has said.

He also expressed confidence that Beijing will not stand in New Delhi's way in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) when it considers changing its guidelines for allowing the world community to have civil nuclear trade with India.

Mukherjee, who described Hu's visit here as "reasonably satisfactory", indicated that India will have no problems if China has a deal with Pakistan similar to Indo-US agreement.

"China has endorsed it," Mukherjee told CNN-IBN in an interview when asked whether the mention of "international civilian nuclear cooperation should be advanced through innovative and forward-looking approaches" in the

joint declaration meant that China has endorsed the Indo-US deal.

Asked by interviewer Karan Thapar whether it meant that China won't stand in the way of international civilian nuclear cooperation between the NSG and India, he said, "I hope so... There is no uncertainty. I hope that they will not come in the way." When asked whether he was confident, he said, "I am confident."

On reports that China may offer Pakistan a nuclear deal similar to the Indo-US agreement, Mukherjee said, "(A) relationship with one country need not stand in the way of (a) relationship with another. We shall have to keep that fact always in view whilst assessing the relationship between two countries."

He said, "We shall have to recognise the fact that different countries have different relationships with different countries keeping in view their own perspectives." To press his argument in the Devil's

Advocate programme, he pointed out that Pakistan is being supplied sophisticated weapons by the US while India is getting military hardware from Russia.

"But that need not stand in the way of building up closer relationships with each other," he said.

Mukherjee also dismissed as "speculative" media reports that Hu, during his meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, had indicated that China will support India's candidature for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

On Hu's visit, the first by a Chinese President in a decade, the minister said, "It was reasonably satisfactory."

To a question about China's plans to forge close political links with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to tie down India, Mukherjee said, "What China intends, what China thinks, has

surely been taken into account in my strategic consideration.

"... (But) I do not believe in the containment (theory). We have gone one step beyond that. We have invited China to be the observer of SAARC, which they were not earlier.

This is an indication of enlargement of cooperation, not a policy of containment of anybody." When referred to China's intentions to form a military encirclement of India, the External Affairs Minister said, "Every country is entitled to prepare its defence preparedness as per its own threat perception. As I'm entitled to prepare myself and to ensure that my defence preparedness should be up to the mark to meet the requirement of my own threat perception." He emphasised that the relationship between India and China is "important for me and we ought to build on this. We have to advance it. We have to progress further."



Chinese President Hu Jintao (2L) and his wife Liu Yongqing (C) stand with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (2R) and his wife Sahiba Musharraf (L) and Punjab province Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahii (R) during their visit at the historic Badshahi mosque of Mughal era in Lahore on Saturday. Jintao successfully negotiated the political minefield of back-to-back visits to India and Pakistan as all three nations focused on the benefits of closer trade ties, analysts said.



A Sri Lankan woman throws a tomato towards a billboard featuring an image of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Leader Velupillai Prabhakaran outside the Fort Railway Station in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka's elusive Tamil Tiger supremo marks his 52nd birthday with a self-imposed deadline to decide the course of Asia's longest-running ethnic conflict.

Tiger supremo faces deadline for war or peace in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's elusive Tamil Tiger supremo marks his 52nd birthday yesterday with a self-imposed deadline to decide the course of Asia's longest-running ethnic conflict.

Velupillai Prabhakaran has no official birthday celebrations but his annual speech on Monday will be keenly watched by Sri Lankan leaders as well as those in foreign capitals struggling to broker peace.

"There are no official functions or celebrations," said Tiger military spokesman Rasiyah Illanthiriyar. "But many people usually have religious observances or share sweets to mark the occasion."

Born on November 26, 1954 in the island's arid north, Prabhakaran, a school drop-out, has built what is regarded the world's deadliest guerrilla outfit. He commands a squad of suicide bombers who have even inspired al-Qaeda.

Prabhakaran's birthday coincides with the "Heroes Week" of his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which honours the 18,500-plus men and women who have died fighting for a separate state called Eelam.

The celebrations mark the anniversary on November 27, a day after Prabhakaran's birthday, of the death of the first Tiger guerrilla - shot dead by security forces in 1982.

This year's Heroes Week has added significance because of the escalating violence that has killed at least 3,422 people by official count in the past year.

Prabhakaran in his message last year put the government on notice to come up with a reasonable political solution.

"This is our urgent and final appeal," Prabhakaran said last year. "If the new government rejects our urgent appeal, we will, next year... establish self-government in our homeland."

Hu eases thru' Indo-Pak political minefield

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Hu Jintao successfully negotiated the political minefield of back-to-back visits to India and Pakistan as all three nations focused on the benefits of closer trade ties, analysts said.

Hu was due back in Beijing Sunday after a near blemish-free week on the subcontinent, where he sold the message to a slightly sceptical India of the riches that China offered and oversaw a free-trade pact with close ally Pakistan.

"If India and China take the necessary steps to strengthen trade and business, the 21st Century will be Asia's," Hu said in Mumbai as he urged the two nations to work harder towards a free-trade pact.

Earlier in the visit, the world's two most populous nations agreed to double trade to 40 billion dollars by 2010 and push ahead with efforts to settle a long-festering border row that brought them to war in 1962.

In Islamabad, Hu and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf oversaw the signing of a free-trade

agreement and committed their two nations to expanding their ties in other spheres such as the military.

Officials said the trade agreement could triple trade between China and Pakistan to 15 billion dollars within five years.

"This serves the fundamental interests of our two peoples and is also conducive to the peace and development of our region," Hu said.

Hu remained in Lahore on Sunday for the inauguration ceremony of an electronics plant and a "higher economic zone" being set up by China.

Hu's trip to both countries, the first by a Chinese president since Jiang Zemin a decade ago, had been seen as potentially fraught with difficulties in relation to the South Asian neighbours' historic rivalry.

While China wanted to engage India and continue to improve ties that still suffer from Cold War animosities, it did not want to do that at the expense of its alliance with Pakistan or by upsetting the sensitive regional balance.

"In the past, when Chinese leaders visited these two countries,

they always went to Pakistan first and then India," Zhang Li, a professor with the Institute of South Asian Studies at China's Sichuan university, told AFP.

"But this time Hu Jintao visited India first. There's something in that. China's South Asian policy has changed in recent years. China is now carrying out a balanced diplomatic relationship with India and Pakistan."

Aside from their ongoing territorial dispute and India's concern about China's cosy ties with Pakistan, Beijing and New Delhi have also increasingly become competitors globally for energy and other natural resources.

But while Indian industry chiefs and government leaders may not be prepared to trust China and remain concerned over security issues, they do understand that engaging the Asian economic powerhouse is the only way forward.

"Why should we cut off our nose to spite our face? The process of engagement on trade will continue despite security concerns," said G Parthasarathy, a former Indian ambassador to China.

Nepal grants citizenship rights to millions

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament granted millions the opportunity to become new citizens yesterday, passing a bill that helps a migrant population on its India border get the chance to vote in national elections due next year.

"Parliament sitting on Sunday passed the citizenship bill paving way for granting citizenship to some five million people who were born in Nepal before 1990," said Hridayesh Tripathi, the minister for industry, commerce and supplies.

The law particularly aids the Madhesi community living in Terai region on southern plains bordering India, the minister added.

Previous governments had been

reluctant to provide citizenship to people in the Terai belt because they feared being overwhelmed by Indian nationals who have links to the country through a porous border.

Nepal shares an open border of 1,700km with neighbouring India and both countries allow nationals to cross with little interference.

"This is a significant decision taken by parliament as it comes at a time when the country is gearing towards holding of constituent assembly elections," said Tripathi.

The potential new voters may come to play a key part in Nepal if Maoists and political parties adhere to a landmark peace deal reached last week and hold national elections next year.

Iran clears Khan of N-proliferation charges

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Claiming its nuclear programme was indigenous, Iran has 'cleared' Pakistan, especially its disgraced nuclear scientist AQ Khan, of having been involved in the proliferation of nuclear technology to Tehran.

This has prompted a section of Pakistanis to launch an offensive against the government in general and President Pervez Musharraf in particular for being "on the defensive" in the face of "Western propaganda" and demand that the ailing Khan, now under house detention, be treated better.

The 'clearing' of Pakistan's name by Iran even as the government announced in Islamabad that Khan had "fully recovered" six weeks after a prostate cancer surgery.

Iran's former president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and National Security Council secretary general Ali Larjani told a team of visiting Pakistani journalists that Iran's nuclear programme was fully indigenous.

Larjani "categorically denied receiving centrifuges from Pakistan. This gives lie to reports regarding Tehran having confessed to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that centrifuges supplied by Khan were the source of the high-level nuclear contamination allegedly detected in one of Iran's nuclear facilities," The Nation said.