

Indo-Pak FMs to hold substantive talks in Jan

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and Pakistan will hold "substantive talks" on January 13 when Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee travels to Islamabad to invite President Pervez Musharraf for Saarc Summit to be held here in April.

The decision was taken here Sunday when Mukherjee met his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, who was by his side, was not on an official visit.

Mukherjee said "substantive talks" will be held when he travels to Pakistan on January 13 to invite the Pakistani President on behalf of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to attend the 14th SAARC summit to be held here on April 3-4.

The last Indo-Pak foreign ministerial talks were held in

October 2005 when the then Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh had gone to Pakistan. Kasuri said Mukherjee and he realise the importance of the relations between the two countries and feel the need to build the trust.

"We both agreed that India-Pakistan relations are very important. We need to develop trust," Kasuri said.

Kasuri said he had developed trust with Mukherjee's two predecessors -- Natwar Singh and Yashwant Sinha -- whom he met during the last two days. "I am looking forward to developing similar trust with him (Mukherjee)," the Pakistani foreign minister said.

He said he was happy to see a "very senior Congress leader" as external affairs minister. "It gives me great hope because whatever we have to do, it requires people, politicians, who are strong," he said, adding after meeting Mukherjee he had "greater hope."

The foreign ministerial talks will take place two months after the foreign secretaries of the two countries held detailed deliberations on all eight outstanding issues, including terrorism and Jammu and Kashmir.



Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri (R) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee (L) as they address the media after an informal lunch in New Delhi yesterday. The foreign ministers of India and Pakistan agreed to meet in Islamabad early next year for "substantive talks" on the nuclear-armed rivals' peace process, the two officials said.

Thai junta proposes lifting of martial law

All 994 schools in Muslim south to keep doors closed

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's junta leader said yesterday that he has asked the government to lift martial law across more than half the country in what would be the first easing of military rule since the September coup.

General Sonthi Boonyaratglin told reporters that only Bangkok and parts of the far south and the north and northeast would remain under martial law.

The cabinet will meet Tuesday to consider the proposal. Any decision would also have to be endorsed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Sonthi said he had recommended to Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont that martial law be lifted in "some parts of the country, except for provinces on the borders and in Bangkok, which I will leave to the prime minister to decide."

"It would be lifted in about 40 provinces," he said. Thailand counts 76 in all.

"It's up to the cabinet to decide when martial law will be lifted. We cannot decide for them," Sonthi added.

He said he wanted to keep the regime in Thailand's restive Muslim-majority southern provinces, where ethnic Malay separatists have stepped up their bloody battle against the government.

However, most of the provinces where martial law would remain in place are in Thailand's populous northern and northeastern regions, still considered to be bastions of support for ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

While Sonthi said he would allow Surayud to decide whether to lift martial law in Bangkok, he warned he would hold the prime minister responsible for any incidents that might occur in the capital.

"If we lift martial law and something happens, the prime minister will be held primarily responsible," he added.

Sonthi installed Surayud as prime minister, but the junta has kept the power to sack him.

Despite pressure from the United States and the European Union to lift martial law, Sonthi has resisted doing so because of what he describes as anti-coup "undercurrents".

The military-installed government fears that Thaksin, who was twice elected to office, will try to return to Thailand and that his supporters could rise up against the coup.

Thaksin was in New York when the military ousted him on September 19. He then spent a month in London, where he has a home.

For the last month he has been travelling around Asia, raising speculation about whether he was planning to return home.

Meanwhile, Thailand will close all 994 public schools indefinitely in the country's restive Muslim-

majority south after a string of arson and shootings that left two teachers dead, an official said Monday.

"We have made a decision because we are worried about our own safety and our lives," said Boonsom Thongsriplai, the chairman of the Teachers Federation of Pattani, one of three insurgency-torn southern provinces bordering Malaysia.

All 994 public schools, ranging from elementary to high schools, in Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala would be closed from Tuesday, Boonsom said, adding that all 336 schools in Pattani and 100 in Yala were already closed.

The school closure was due to a wave of arson attacks against school buildings, as well as shootings that killed two Buddhist school teachers last week.

Lanka sinks arms ship

Tiger boss to chart next course of action

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy sank a trawler carrying a suspected Tamil Tiger arms shipment off the island's northwest coast on Monday, hours ahead of the rebel leader's annual address expected to chart the course for more war.

The military said the navy came under fire from the 45-ft trawler in open seas, returned fire and the boat exploded, the latest in a string of such clashes in recent weeks as a new chapter in the two-decade civil war escalates.

"The navy retaliated and the boat blasted," said a military spokesman, asking not to be named. "We believe it belonged to the LTTE and believe it was carrying weapons and explosives judging by the blast." He said the six-strong crew perished.

Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was due to make his annual speech from a secret location in the rebels' northeastern stronghold on Monday, in which he was widely expected to threaten more conflict.

From financial markets to shopkeepers, diplomats to weary refugees displaced by air raids and battles, all eyes will be on the shadowy leader's speech, seen as setting the path for the Tigers' military and political strategy for the coming year.

Last year, Prabhakaran -- who is revered within the rebel group as "National Leader" of the homeland for minority Tamils they say they are fighting for -- gave the government a year to find a political solution to the war or face renewed struggle.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has rejected the idea of a separate Tamil homeland out of hand, and more

than 3,000 civilians, troops and Tiger fighters have died in a string of military clashes and ambushes during his first year in office.

A 2002 truce lies in tatters, although both sides are adamant it still holds and accuse the other of trying to reignite war.

In Colombo, troops tightened security and checked cars and shops on Monday amid fears of renewed attacks on the capital during Prabhakaran's Heroes' Day speech to commemorate more than 18,700 slain rebel fighters.

Witnesses in Tiger territory said roads had been decked out with red Tiger flags emblazoned with roaring golden tigers and crossed rifles and pictures of Prabhakaran in characteristic Tiger-striped fatigues and cap, sidearm at the ready.

Bomber kills 2 Nato soldiers in Afghanistan

REUTERS, Kandahar

A suicide bomber killed two Nato soldiers in an attack on an alliance convoy in Afghanistan's southern city of Kandahar yesterday, a Nato spokesman said.

Nato spokesman in Kandahar, Squadron Leader Jason Chalk, could not give the nationalities of those killed, but Canadians form the bulk of the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Kandahar.

Civilians said the bomber ploughed into the convoy in a car. Nato forces sealed off the site of the attack on a road where several government buildings are located, they said.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. Flames and smoke rose from one of the vehicles and a Nato helicopter hovered overhead, the witnesses said.

Nepal gives Maoists \$1.3m for camps

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government approved a payment of 1.3 million dollars for Maoists to house their People's Liberation Army in camps under the terms of a landmark peace deal, officials said yesterday.

Monday's cabinet meeting held at Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala's residence decided to release the amount to be used immediately for the installation of temporary camps for the PLA across the country and arrangements for rations and other essential commodities, government spokesman Dilendra Prasad Badu told AFP.

The United Nations has pledged to monitor the camps housing the Maoists, who agreed to place arms and soldiers at seven sites as part of a deal to end a decade of war and join the government.

But the status of the rebel army after joining the government has not been resolved.

The money pledged Monday will come from state coffers and is around a third of the total to be allotted to the former insurgents, another official said.

"The government has planned to provide a total sum of 280 million (Nepalese rupees, or 3.8 million dollars) for the management of PLA cantonments due to be installed in seven places across the country," Minister for Physical Planning and Works Gopal Man Shrestha told AFP.

Last Thursday the government handed over an initial 945,000 dollars pledged under the peace deal, Badu said.

Nepal's Maoists officially ended their decade-long "people's war" last week, when the party leader Prachanda inked a comprehensive peace pact with Koirala.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A humpback whale breaches off South Africa's coast in a file photo. Humpback whales have a type of brain cell seen only in humans, the great apes, and other cetaceans such as dolphins, US researchers reported on Monday.

Humpback whales have 'human' brain cells

REUTERS, Washington

Humpback whales have a type of brain cell seen only in humans, the great apes, and other cetaceans such as dolphins, US researchers reported yesterday.

This might mean such whales are more intelligent than they have been given credit for, and suggests the basis for complex brains either evolved more than once, or has gone unused by most species of animals, the researchers said.

The finding may help explain some of the behaviours seen in whales, such as intricate communication skills, the formation of alliances, cooperation, cultural transmission and tool usage, the researchers report in The Anatomical Record.

Patrick Hof and Estel Van der Gucht of the Department of Neuroscience at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York studied the brains of humpback whales and discovered a type of cell called a spindle neuron in the cortex, in areas comparable to where they are seen in humans and great apes.

Although the function of spindle neurons is not well understood, they may be involved in cognition -- learning, remember-

ing and recognising the world around oneself. Spindle cells may be affected by Alzheimer's disease and other debilitating brain disorders such as autism and schizophrenia.

The researchers found spindle neurons in the same location in toothed whales with the largest brains, which the researchers said suggests that they may be related to brain size. Toothed whales such as orcas are generally considered more intelligent than baleen whales such as humpbacks and blue whales, which filter water for their food.

The humpbacks also had structures that resembled "islands" in the cerebral cortex, also seen in some other mammals.

These islands may have evolved in order to promote fast and efficient communication between neurons, the researchers said.

Spindle neurons probably first appeared in the common ancestor of hominids, humans and great apes about 15 million years ago, the researchers said -- they are not seen in lesser apes or monkeys.

In cetaceans they would have evolved earlier, possibly as early as 30 million years ago, the researchers said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian actor Abhishek Bachchan (C/Rear) and his mother Jaya Bachchan (R) walk with actress Aishwarya Rai (C) as they leave the Sankat Mochan Mandir in Varanasi early yesterday. Bachchan and former Miss World Rai, were accompanied by family members as they took part in various Pujas or rituals at two temples in the historic city on the banks of the River Ganges, leading to rumours that they were getting married very soon.

Abhishek, Ash step closer to wedding?

PTI, Varanasi

Bollywood sensation Abhishek Bachchan and beauty queen-turned actress Aishwarya Rai took part in pujas along with his family at the Kashi Viswanath and Sankat Mochan temples in Varanasi early this morning, capping a night of rumours that they were getting married.

Abhishek's father and Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan, mother Jaya, sister Shweta Nanda, uncle Ajitabh and his daughter Namrata and Samajwadi Party General Secretary Amar Singh took part in the 'Mangla Aarti' and 'Rudra Abhishek' rituals at the ancient temples in the city.

The family also offered prayers at Ram Janaki temple near Sankat Mochan temple and participated in an 'aarti' for Lord Hanuman there. The Bachchans and Aishwarya reached temples amidst heavy posse of police personnel and a battery of media persons.

Incidentally, today is the 99th birthday of Bachchan's father and noted Hindi poet Harivanshrai Bachchan.

Britain blasts Iran's 'unacceptable' role in Iraq

AFP, London

Britain yesterday condemned Iran's behaviour in fuelling violence in neighbouring Iraq as "unacceptable," calling on Tehran to become a constructive partner with the West or face greater isolation.

Defence Secretary Des Browne warned the Islamic republic against seeing Iraq as a "tool in a wider confrontation" with the international community, which is battling to persuade Tehran to curb its nuclear plans.

"Perhaps the most influential neighbour is Iran, and its behaviour remains a cause of deep concern," he said. "It has influence inside Iraq: the power to turn up or turn down the heat, to turn on or turn off the dialogue."

"It is not using that influence well. Support from within Iran goes to groups who are attacking our forces, but also to groups who

are simply fuelling the sectarian violence," he added in a keynote speech in London.

"This is unacceptable, and also, in the end, counter-productive," he said.

Prime Minister Tony Blair recently warned both Iran and Syria that they had a "strategic choice" in the Middle East, between supporting terrorism and partnership with the West.

Browne, speaking at the Chatham House think tank, reiterated this warning.

"Iran must start seeing Iraq not as a tool in a wider confrontation with the West, but as a vital interest in its own right," he said.

"So the message to Iran is simple. Be a constructive partner, help yourself as well as the wider region - or face increasing isolation."