



PHOTO: AFP

A crowd of hundreds of onlookers gather at the site of a train accident in Bhagalpur in India's northern state of Bihar Saturday. At least 34 people were killed when a 140-year-old bridge crashed on an inter-city passenger train in eastern India.

Burns to visit India on Dec 6 to discuss nuclear deal

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs R. Nicholas Burns, the key US negotiator for the civil nuclear deal with India, will visit New Delhi from December 6-9 to address India's concerns over the enabling legislation with a Senate-House conference expected to hammer out a final bill next week.

Burns will meet with Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon and other senior officials to discuss bilateral and regional issues, including the US-India civil nuclear cooperation initiative, according to a state department press notice.

Burns has had extensive discussions over telephone with India's chief negotiator Shyam Saran after the US Senate cleared the enabling bill with an 85-12 vote last month over New Delhi's concerns about the language and other provisions in the legislation.

In New Delhi, he is expected to take up with Saran how to take forward their negotiations over a so-

called "123 Agreement" - a term for a peaceful nuclear cooperation pact with a foreign country under the conditions outlined in Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act.

The senior US official who travels to India after taking part in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Ministerial in Brussels will also discuss defence cooperation, and trade and investment relations as part of the US-India Strategic Dialogue.

Washington has time and again declared that it considers successful implementation of the India-US nuclear deal as a key element of a new strategic partnership between them.

"We look forward to working with India to fully implement this agreement, to fulfilling the commitments made by President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July of 2005 and March of 2006," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared after the Senate vote.

Both Rice and Burns have

expressed the hope that the Senate-House Conference would address the remaining issues of concern to New Delhi and Washington, with the latter promising to "do our best" to see if their sensitivities can be dealt with at the conference.

New Delhi has expressed concern about some provisions in the Senate bill and unpalatable references to Iran in the House version with Singh conveying his hope to Bush that the bill in its final form will accommodate India's stated concerns.

Section 106 of the Senate bill for one prohibits the export of any equipment, materials or technology related to the enrichment of uranium, the reprocessing of spent fuel, or the production of heavy water.

Another provision, Section 107 requires an end-use monitoring programme to be carried out with respect to US exports and re-exports of nuclear materials, equipment, and technology sold or leased to India.

Controversial security law to be changed

Says Indian PM

REUTERS, Imphal

A controversial security law in northeastern India that critics say has been misused to kill and torture suspects will be amended, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Saturday.

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA), is intended to help fight the more than two-dozen insurgencies active in the remote area.

Human rights activists have demanded its repeal, saying it has been brazenly misused to kill, arrest and torture people on mere suspicion of being insurgents or supporters of the revolts.

Several movements have been organised in the past to put pressure on the government to repeal the law, including a six-year hunger-strike by a Manipuri activist who is currently in a hospital in New Delhi.

"I believe we need to consider some amendments to the act by modifying existing provisions or inserting new provisions, whereby it could be made more humane giving due regard to the protection of basic human and civil rights," Singh said on a brief visit to state capital Imphal.

"The armed forces are here to enforce the rule of law, to punish the law breaker and ensure safety of Manipuris. Occasionally, the acts of a few may have become the object of public resentment," he added.

Rebel groups, seeking independence of Manipur from India, called for a public boycott of Singh's visit. The streets of Imphal were deserted and schools and shops were shut in protest.

Singh said the home ministry was working on the proposed amendments.

Several killed in attack in Afghan south

Taliban shot down US chopper

REUTERS, Kandahar

At least eight people were killed in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar yesterday in a suicide car bombing against Nato troops and subsequent gunfire by the soldiers, police and witnesses said.

Three civilians died when the bomber struck a military convoy and five more were shot by troops afterwards, they said.

Nato spokesman Major Luke Knittig said he had no immediate information on casualties.

Asked about the accounts of troops shooting civilians, he said: "We will establish the facts. It is still unclear in what way the troops reacted."

Both Nato and US-led coalition troops are stationed in Kandahar,

the heartland of the Taliban insurgency, which has been stepped up this year, including a dramatic increase in suicide attacks, previously almost unheard of in Afghanistan.

Two Canadian soldiers were killed in a suicide car bombing in Kandahar last week.

Meanwhile, the Taliban said on Sunday it had shot down a US civilian helicopter chartered by Nato that crashed in bad weather in southern Afghanistan.

"The chopper has crashed and there have been mortalities. We do not know how many," said Interior Ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary said, adding that the cause of Saturday's crash in a remote area of southern Kandahar province was not known.

Identity becomes woe for Indian Muslims

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The very visible identities of Islam - burqa, beard, skullcap and hijab - are posing problems to large numbers of Muslims in India, a country with the world's second largest Islamic population.

And Justice Rajinder Sachar, whose 404-page report on the status of Indian Muslims has been submitted to Parliament, says that the police, media as well as the society at large need to be blamed for the community's negative image.

Among the report's shocking revelations is that the mere identity of Muslims has become a headache for them in public spaces, be it a railway station, park, hospital or school.

"Being identified as a Muslim is considered to be problematic for many," says the report that has sparked many eyebrows because it has gone into great details about the pathetic socio-economic conditions of India's largest minority.

"Markers of Muslim identity - the burqa, the purdah (veil), the beard and the topi - while adding to the distinctiveness of Indian Muslims have been a cause of concern for them in the public realm," it said.

But the report admitted that sense of insecurity and discrimi-

nation, though felt widely, varied in "gravity, intensity and magnitude" from state to state. The markers have very often turned into a target of ridicule and become a reason for being looked down upon with suspicion.

"Muslim men donning a beard and a topi are often picked up for interrogation from public spaces like parks, railway stations and markets," former chief of Delhi High Court said.

"Muslims live with an inferiority complex as 'every bearded man is considered to be an ISI (Pakistan's spy agency) agent', 'whenever any incident occurs Muslim boys are picked up by the police' and fake encounters are common," says the report.

Muslim women complained to the committee that it was becoming increasingly difficult for them to find jobs.

They complained of impolite treatment in markets, hospitals and schools, and in accessing public facilities such as public transport, besides encountering difficulties getting a house on rent and getting their children into reputed schools.

"A large majority of Muslims would apparently prefer to send their children to regular mainstream schools," said the report.

IAEA chief warns against isolation of Iran, N Korea

Pyongyang, Moscow in secret deal over nuclear talks

AFP, Kyoto/Tokyo

UN atomic watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei yesterday warned against diplomatic isolation of North Korea and Iran, saying confrontation would only lead them to accelerate their nuclear programmes.

Diplomacy was key to dealing with both countries, he said, although Iran's case was different since, unlike North Korea, there was no evidence it had yet acquired the capacity to develop nuclear arms.

Even if Iran intends to develop an atom bomb, intelligence suggests they are still four to nine years away from doing so, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency told a seminar at Kyoto University in western Japan.

"That means we still have enough time for diplomacy. We need to reintegrate them into the international community and gradually try to change the hearts and minds in Iran through a process of reintegration," he said.

North Korea came under fresh sanctions after testing an atom bomb on October 9, while Iran also faces threats of punitive measures for refusing to freeze nuclear enrichment.

"We should not talk about changing the government in Iran. We should not talk about use of military force in Iran, because the more you talk about that the more the Iranians

or the (North) Koreans will feel threatened and will continue to accelerate their nuclear weapon programme," ElBaradei warned.

The UN nuclear watchdog chief argued that sanctions alone would not resolve the Iran or North Korea situations.

"I've always said that sanctions alone will never resolve a conflict. In many cases sanctions harden the resolve of a country," he said.

"You have, in addition to sanctions, to provide incentives. You have to work with a stick and a carrot."

The United States and Japan led a drive that imposed further sanctions on the North after its nuclear test.

Washington has also called for UN sanctions against Iran in response to its sensitive nuclear work. But Russia and China have been more cautious.

ElBaradei arrived in Japan on Wednesday and met Thursday with Foreign Minister Taro Aso.

On Monday he heads to China, where two days of meetings last week involving US and North Korean envoys failed to set a date for the next round of stalled six-party talks on halting Pyongyang's nuclear programmes.

Meanwhile, North Korea has offered Russia exclusive rights to its natural uranium deposits in exchange for Moscow's support at six-party talks aimed at

denuclearising Pyongyang, a report said yesterday.

Russia had requested that North Korea give Moscow exclusive rights to import Pyongyang's natural uranium, with plans to profit by enriching and exporting it as nuclear fuel to China and Vietnam, the Tokyo Shimbun reported in a dispatch from Vladivostok in eastern Russia.

The two countries have been secretly in talks since 2002 on the deal, but Pyongyang only recently showed a positive attitude on the deal, demanding Russian support its position in the stalled six-party talks as a precondition for the deal, the newspaper said, citing unnamed Russian government sources.

The multi-lateral talks, which started in 2003, broke down late last year when North Korea walked out over separate financial sanctions imposed on it by the United States for money laundering and counterfeiting.

Pyongyang only agreed about a month ago to return to the talks after testing its nuclear bomb and drawing UN Security Council sanctions.

The US, along with Japan, has said it would not resume the six-party talks until a concrete outcome is ready to be put on the table, fearing North Korea would use the meeting as a stalling tactic to expand its nuclear arsenal.