

Crisis in Delhi casts uncertainty over future of Indo-Pak talks

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: Indian and Pakistani diplomats held a fourth day of talks today aimed at thawing their frosty relations, but a political crisis in New Delhi cast uncertainty over the future of the nascent dialogue, reports Reuters.

Indian Foreign Ministry Secretary Salman Haidar and his Pakistani counterpart Shamshad Ahmad, who held lengthy discussions at Haidar's residence on Sunday, were expected to complete their negotiations later today officials said.

They said the delegations would try to agree on a joint concluding statement that would hold out the prospect of another round of talks, without necessarily setting a date.

The two sides have kept a veil of silence over their talks, the first since a similar dialogue collapsed in acrimony three years ago over the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir.

The talks have coincided with renewed violence in Kashmir and political turmoil in New Delhi, where the Congress Party on Sunday withdrew support for Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda's 10-month-old minority coalition government.

Rival politicians, including Foreign Minister Inder Gujral and Congress General Secretary Ghulam Nabi Azad, said the Congress bombshell would not wreck the India-Pakistan talks.

But the Hindu newspaper regretted the timing of the attempt to bring down Deve Gowda's United Front coalition.

"At this precise moment the prospect of adding a richer dimension to the doctrine of good neighbourliness had looked especially promising with the long-awaited meeting of the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan at last taking place in New Delhi," the daily said in an editorial.

"But... as a result of the Congress's volte-face, the crucial talks, have suddenly been emptied of political significance."

Jaswant Singh, Deputy leader of India's biggest single parliamentary group, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said the talks were unlikely to achieve results, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

PTI quoted him as criticising Deve Gowda for a newspaper interview before the talks in which he offered "minor adjustments" on the ceasefire line dividing Kashmir, of which India controls two thirds and Pakistan the rest.

Singh also slammed Farooq Abdullah, Chief Minister of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, for suggesting that the ceasefire line be recognised as an international border.

"These were irresponsible and immature actions of respectable persons," he said, recalling a resolution passed by the Indian parliament declaring that Pakistan's "occupation" of part of Kashmir was the only problem between the two countries.

In Pakistan, the Lahore-based daily The Nation today urged India to lay aside Kashmir's "phony treaty of accession" and allow Kashmiris a genuine vote to decide their own future.

It said the fate of the talks depended on whether both countries recognised that nothing could be settled unilaterally.

"In the final analysis it is not even a question who is right or who is wrong, but what do the people of Kashmir want? Let a neutral Party find out in an internationally recognised way and that would be the end of the matter," The Nation added.

BSP leader shot dead in Lucknow

LUCKNOW, Mar 31: Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Virendra Pratap Shahi was today shot dead in the posh Indira Nagar locality here by unidentified assailants, reports PTI.

Two scooter-borne assailants sprayed bullets on Shahi near the Spring Dale School when he was going to his sister's house on foot.

The alleged mafia don of the eastern Uttar Pradesh, from Gorakhpur, died on the spot, police said.

Senior district and Police officials have rushed to the site of the incident and police have launched a manhunt to nab the killers.

Shahi had unsuccessfully contested the recent assembly by-election from Maniram constituency in Gorakhpur district.

Earlier, in the October assembly elections, he had lost the same seat on a Samajwadi Party ticket, following which he had joined the BSP.



Israeli tanks are lined up outside the West Bank city of Nablus Sunday while rioting Palestinians in the town were prevented from reaching the Israeli-controlled Joseph's Tomb. Following 12 days of riots against Israel's decision to build the Jewish Har Homa neighbourhood in Jerusalem, the Palestinians and Israeli Arabs are marking "Land Day," commemorating the 1976 clashes in Galilee over a land confiscation that left several Israeli, Arabs dead. — AFP/UNB photo

Zairean rebels ready to talk with Mobutu

GOMA, Zaire, Mar 31: Rebels in Zaire are preparing to negotiate with the government in Kinshasa "as from Thursday," rebel justice minister Kongolo Mwenze announced in this eastern Zairean town late Sunday, reports AFP.

He said the rebel alliance led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila was "ready to begin genuine negotiations" with the regime of ailing president Mobutu Sese Seko "from Thursday."

But he warned that the rebels would "not be there to share power."

"These discussions at delegation level, will focus on preparations for a meeting between Kabila and Mobutu," he told a press conference in the eastern town of Goma where the rebels have set up their headquarters.

"At the moment, we believe there is a good chance that this will take place in South Africa. There is no plan for Lomé" — the Togolese capital where representatives of the two sides met for the first time last week under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity.

Mwenze said he was speaking on behalf of Kabila who "for reasons of fatigue" could not be present.

He said the two delegations would discuss "technicalities, a basis for talks and pre-conditions, meaning who we are to deal with. We will not be there to share power."

Mwenze said he hoped a meeting could be arranged "as soon as possible" between Kabila and Mobutu. "It would be preferable for it to be in April," he said.

Meanwhile, the HCR, the United Nations refugee agency must not "dictate" the route Rwandan refugees should take to return to their own country, the rebel "finance minister" Mavupanga Mwana Nanga said in Goma Sunday.

"It is not up to the HCR (the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) to dictate to us by what route they want to repatriate the refugees."

The rebels and the HCR are currently locked in a dispute over how to repatriate about 100,000 Rwandan refugees stranded near Kisangani which fell to the rebels on March 15.

Kesri's decision provokes political confusion

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: The leader of India's Congress Party has taken a political gamble that may topple Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda but leave the ruling coalition in power and economic reforms intact, analysts said today, reports Reuters.

Congress president Sitaram Kesri's surprise decision on Sunday to withdraw support for Deve Gowda's minority government provoked political confusion that sent share prices tumbling.

The Congress move opened a bewildering array of possibilities ranging from a parliamentary vote of confidence in Deve Gowda's 10-month-old government to snap general elections.

President Shankar Dayal Sharma was consulting constitutional experts following Kesri's decision to stake a claim to rule. But analysts predicted the Congress leader, undercut by divisions in his own party and reluctant to face the electorate, would be unable to thrust himself in to power and might have to settle for a revamped centre-left coalition.

"It's a blind gamble by Kesri," said Pran Chopra of the Centre for Policy Research, an independent think-tank. "He has propelled himself into a situation from which he is unlikely to derive any benefit."

Political leaders sought to assuage financial markets fears, "political stability and economic reform are not inter-linked," said Jaipal Reddy, spokesman for Deve Gowda's Janata Dal Party, "reforms will go on irrespective of who will be in power."

Kesri, who was thrust to the head of India's oldest party last September after former prime minister PV Narasimha Rao resigned over corruption charges, drew stinging criticism from newspapers which accused him of political expediency.

The decision smacks of a desperation that comes from deep political and personal paranoia," the Indian Express said.

Kesri's timing — with the budget still before parliament and sensitive talks with Pakistan underway in the capital — was shocking, the newspaper said in a front-page editorial.

In a letter to President Sharma on Sunday, the Congress leader cited lawlessness, a drift in the economy and a growing communal menace for his decision to revoke support.

Analysts said Kesri appeared fed up with the United Front's unwillingness to cooperate in the key northern state of Uttar Pradesh, a former Congress stronghold where the BJP recently succeeded in installing a coalition government.

They said Kesri was also concerned over a spate of corruption investigations into Congress leaders close to him.

Analysts said the absence of several powerful Congress leaders from a strategy meeting on Sunday indicated Kesri had not mustered undivided support for his move to oust Deve Gowda.

Netanyahu laments virtual collapse of ME peace Arab FMs for reactivating economic boycott of Israel

CAIRO, Mar 31: A draft resolution circulating at an Arab foreign ministers meeting in Cairo on Sunday recommended Arab states reactivate the Arab economic boycott of Israel, reports Reuters.

It also suggested Arab states stop normalisation with the Jewish state, close Israeli offices and missions and pull out of multilateral talks on aspects of Middle East peace.

The measures are in response to the Israeli government's policy of settling Jews in disputed east Jerusalem, a policy Arab states say is in violation of commitments Israel made in earlier stages of Middle East peace talks.

Israel's decision to start breaking ground for a new Jewish settlement in Arab east Jerusalem two weeks ago have sparked 11 days of clashes with Palestinians in the West Bank. Arab and Islamic states have been hinting for more than a week at retaliation against Israel but they had not spelled out in detail the steps they were planning to take.

The draft resolution, confirmed in most details by a senior Arab League official, makes some specific recommendations.

The draft says: The council of the Arab League recommends stopping all normalisation steps which have been taken with Israel in the framework of the peace process and stopping to deal with it (Israel), including closing offices and missions.

Meanwhile, Israel branded as absurd an Arab League resolution on Sunday recommending that member countries suspend steps towards normal relations with Israel.

"Normal neighbourly relations and regional co-operation are supposed to be an asset and a common interest for all countries in this region," Foreign Ministry spokesman Ygal Palmor told Reuters.

"It is absurd that they are being deemed as a whip, so to speak, to be used against Israel whenever there is a crisis in the peace process," he said.

In Cairo, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara and Palestinian leader Farouk Kaddoumi told reporters that the same resolution, which passed unanimously, also recommended restoring the Arab boycott of Israel.

AP adds: Accusing the Palestinians of unleashing "terrorism as a weapon of the negotiations," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday lamented "a virtual collapse of the peace process."

Netanyahu reiterated that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat must crack down on Islamic militants to halt violence before peace talks resume.

BRRIEFLY

Russia to sign charter with NATO: Russian President Boris Yeltsin will sign a charter with NATO at a meeting in Paris in May, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Sunday, citing an unidentified Kremlin source, AP reports from Moscow.

The report did not provide details of the Paris meeting, or of the proposed charter, saying only that its terms were settled at the Helsinki summit between President Bill Clinton. No one was available to confirm the report Sunday night at the Kremlin and the Russian foreign ministry.

Clark to head US forces in Europe: President Bill Clinton has chosen Army Gen. Wesley Clark to become the next top NATO commander and head of US forces in Europe, the Washington Post reported in its yesterday edition, Reuters reports from Washington.

Quoting unidentified senior defence officials, the newspaper said a formal announcement was expected yesterday.

Clark, 52, was the senior military member on the US team, led by diplomat Richard Holbrooke, that brokered the 1995 Dayton peace accords. The agreement stopped the fighting in Bosnia and set terms for the NATO-led peacekeeping force.

Russian border guards kill 3: Russian border guards shot dead three people trying to cross into Tajikistan from neighbouring Afghanistan late on Sunday, a Russian military spokesman said today, Reuters reports from Almaty.

The spokesman for the border troops speaking from the Tajik capital Dushanbe said the three had tried to cross the Pyandzh river, which marks part of the border in the south of the country, in an inflatable dinghy.

Mandela returns home: South African President Nelson Mandela returned home Sunday from a vigorous four-day tour of Bangladesh and India only to leave again to meet his sweetheart at her home in Maputo, Mozambique, an official said in Johannesburg, yesterday.

Mandela, who was tired but in good health, planned to spend up to a week relaxing in the Mozambican capital with his companion, Graca Machel, presidential spokeswoman Parks Mankahlana said.

208 killed in SA during Easter holiday: At least 208 people were killed in traffic accidents around South Africa over the Easter holiday weekend to Sunday evening, authorities said, AFP reports from Johannesburg.

At least 97 of the deaths, beginning Thursday evening, had been caused by head-on collisions, the National Road Traffic Information Centre said according to the domestic SAPA news agency. At least 41 deaths were reported in the eastern Cape province, followed by 34 deaths in the Central Free State, 33 in Mpumanga, 24 in the western Cape, 23 in the eastern coastal KwaZulu-Natal province, 19 in Gauteng, 13 in the northern province, 12 in the north west and 7 in the northern Cape, the organisation said.



Thai Prime Minister Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh (C) is surrounded by traditionally dressed Vietnamese women Monday after attending a cultural performance during a visit to a Hanoi touristic landmark, the Temple of Literature. — AFP/UNB photo.



US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich (L) chats with Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto before their breakfast meeting at the premier's official residence Monday. Gingrich is in Japan on a two-day visit as part of his Asian tour to take talks with Japanese leaders. — AFP/UNB photo

Tough US immigration law takes effect today

MIAMI, Mar 31: It will be harder for immigrants to get into the United States and easier for officials to deport those who are here illegally under new rules scheduled to take effect Tuesday, reports AP.

There are reports of increases in marriages between illegal immigrants and Americans, and long lines for people seeking other emergency relief.

The US Immigration and Naturalisation Service says the frenzy is unwarranted, and that there will be no mass deportations.

But the difference is likely to be noticed by people from those trying to enter the country to claim asylum to those seeking to bring family members from other countries.

The new law gets tougher on people who stay after their visas expire. Many illegal immigrants arrive with a temporary visa but fail to go home once it has expired.

Under the new law, anyone caught after having been in the country illegally for a year could be deported and not allowed to return for ten years. Anyone who remains in the country for 180 days illegally won't be allowed back in for three years.

Some immigrants overstay their visas after visiting their legalised families then apply to join their family legally. The move gets around long waits that people who lawfully seek to join their families here often face.

These people have bable to legalise their status after paying a 1000 dls fine if they have family here. New rules ending that practice don't take effect until September.

But in the meantime, those who are here illegally have a tough decision — whether to go back home to wait for legal authorisation to rejoin their family or risk getting barred from the country for years.

Another new measure allows INS officers at ports of entry to turn away people, without a hearing, who show up without documents. There will be little chance for appeal and tough limits on outside court review.

It's designed to prevent illegal immigrants from dragging out their stay here by going to court. INS officials pledge not to curtail the rights of people genuinely fleeing persecution in other countries.

But many immigrant-rights advocates are skeptical.

AFP adds: Mexican officials Sunday expressed concern over the enforcement of new US immigration regulations that some fear will result in massive deportations of Mexican immigrants to the United States.

The new laws require illegal immigrants to legalising their status by April 1. After that date they face deportation and a 10-year period during which they are barred from the country.

Mexico "will not tolerate the enforcement of the laws that damage the dignity, human rights and labour rights of our nationals" working in the United States, according to a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry.

Every year tens of thousands of Mexican workers cross into the United States, many of them illegal, searching for jobs unavailable at home.

Wole Soyinka, 14 others in danger in Nigeria

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: Nobel Prize-winning playwright Wole Soyinka warned that he and 14 others accused of treason by Nigerian military leader General Sani Abacha risk being executed, reports AFP.

"They are in grave danger," Soyinka said in his co-authored in Newsweek International to be published this week.

"Treason is a capital offense and Abacha's regime has taken the charges in front of a court which is obviously incompetent," said Soyinka, 62, who has been living in exile since 1994.

"It has produced no witnesses or evidence. It is the same tragic situation that was faced by Ken Saro-Wiwa, with Abacha acting as judge, jury and executioner."

Saro-Wiwa was one of nine dissidents executed by Abacha's regime in 1995, which spurred Britain into suspending Nigeria's membership in the British Commonwealth.

200 hurt as stadium gallery collapses in India

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: Some 200 spectators were injured Sunday when a stadium gallery collapsed in the southern Indian state of Kerala, news agencies said, reports AFP.

The Press Trust of India said the stadium gallery, which was packed with people, crashed in the state's Vadakara town minutes before a regional volleyball tournament began.

Angry spectators set fire to the damaged bamboo-and-timber gallery and smashed cars near the stadium in protest, the news agency said.

Rescuers ferried some 200 fans to hospitals and private clinics. The United News of India said and added 10 of them were critically injured.

Former CMs demand president's rule in Tripura

BISHALGARH, Tripura, Mar 31: Nripen Chakraborty and Samir Ranjan Burman former chief ministers, on Sunday shared the same platform to demand president's rule in Tripura and holding of fresh elections thereafter, reports PTI.

The expelled CPI-politburo member, Nornagenian Chakraborty told a public meeting, organised by the Congress here, that the third left front ministry came to power following president's rule, "there is nothing unjustified in this demand."

The Congress CLP leader Burman said, all extremists outlist in the state should be banned and the entire state declared disturbed.

Chakraborty and Burman both said that the state government had "failed" on all fronts and especially in curbing growing insurgency.

US condemns attack on rally in Cambodia

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: The State Department on Sunday condemned a violent attack on an opposition demonstration in Cambodia that killed at least 12 people, reports Reuters.

The US condemns this act of violence and we call on the government of Cambodia to take necessary steps to bring to justice those responsible for this unacceptable attack," acting spokesman John Dinger said in a statement.

A lawful peaceful demonstration of the Khmer Nation Party led by Sam Rainsy on March 30 was disrupted when explosives were thrown into the crowd of demonstrators resulting in at least 12 deaths, and injuring over 100," he said.

Reports from Cambodia said an American, Ron Abney, 55, of Cochran, Georgia, who works for International Republican Institute, was wounded in the thing. A State Department spokeswoman said she had no information on that report.

China defends HR records by citing economic progress

BEIJING, Mar 31: Hoping to deflect foreign criticism, and possible UN censure, China on Monday cited the building of schools, reduced poverty, and a bloody crackdown on crime as examples of improvements in its human rights record, reports AP.

In a lengthy report bereft of new initiatives, the government listed efforts that have improved basic living standards for hundreds of millions of Chinese — in keeping with its argument that the most basic human right is the right to food and clothing.

Human rights conditions maintained a good momentum of continuous improvement and promised further progress" last year, said the report, published by the State Council, or Cabinet.

Foreign critics viewed 1996 as a black year for China's rights record.

In a grim assessment, the US State Department said the ruling Communist Party virtually wiped out public expressions of dissent by jailing, intimidating or forcing into exile all vocal critics.

The Chinese government report acknowledged that "human rights concerns still have room for further improvement," but also said China is a developing

country "restricted by its historical and realistic conditions."

It did not mention dissidents but trumpeted legal amendments last year to curb police powers of detention that were welcomed by human rights campaigners abroad.

The report coincides with a meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, which Europe and the United States have in the past six years sought to use as a forum for censuring China's rights record.

Both the United States and the European Union have vowed this year on whether to sponsor a resolution against China. China blocked previous efforts thanks to support from developing nations in the 53-member commission and has vowed to defeat any similar motions again this year.

China argues that the motions are confrontational and says it prefers discussion. During a visit to Beijing last week, US Vice President Al Gore said found Chinese leaders receptive during talks on human rights.

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Off the Record

Humiliating kiss

BEIJING: A Chinese court has jailed seven relatives of a man who hanged himself for forcing his wife to kiss the corpse, the People's Court News reported Monday, says AFP.

The man committed suicide after the Shanghai couple quarrelled last August. Relatives arriving at their home before the funeral forced the wife to kiss her deceased husband, the Congmung court heard before jailing the relatives for between three and eight months.

Mental anguish from the incident caused her to be hospitalised for psychiatric treatment, the report said.

The seven defendants were arrested the following month. The defendants were found guilty of violating laws on public humiliation, it said.

Bid to rebuild Red Chapel

LUXOR, Egypt: A team of French and Egyptian archaeologists has begun rebuilding brick by brick the Red Chapel of Queen Hatshepsut, a unique masterpiece of ancient Egyptian architecture and a precursor of the humble prefab, reports AFP.

"This chapel is the only monument of its size made of red quartzite," said project chief Francois Larche of France, who expects the French Egyptian centre of Karnak, in upper Egypt, to have completed the job by the end of 1997.

"It is also the ancestor of prefabs because all the blocks used to build it were designed ahead of time," Larche said.

The Red Chapel — a sanctuary for a sacred boat which carried the dead to the hereafter — was built by Queen Hatshepsut who ruled from 1504-1483 BC, the wife and half-sister of Tutmosis II who ruled from 1520 to 1504.

Experts have been unable to identify the initial location of the chapel but agree that Tutmosis III, who succeeded Hatshepsut, his aunt, after first marrying her, dismantled it as part of his campaign to erase all monuments dedicated to the woman he accused of being a "usurper."

The chapel's 271 quartzite and 44 diorite blocks were found in near-perfect state inside the third pylon of the temple of Karnak in Luxor.

The third pylon was built by Amenhotep III and the blocks were used as part of its foundations.

In 1932 the 315 blocks were placed on raised benches near the temple with other artifacts found in the site.

"In April (1996) we began studying the reconstruction process and within week we should start re-assembling the blocks," Larche said.