

NATO bomb threat remains: Next talks Mar 15

All sides fail to reach full agreement on Kosovo

RAMBOUILLET, France, Feb 24: The United States and five European nations decided Tuesday to suspend the Kosovo peace talks until March 15, saying that despite "major progress" they have not been able to get either Serbs or Kosovo Albanians to sign a deal, reports AP.

French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, co-chairmen of the conference, warned both sides to respect a ceasefire in the meantime, and to "abstain from any action which would undermine" the peace effort.

After more than two weeks of negotiations, Cook said "we do not have the signatures" either on political aspects of the peace accord or the military annex that the six-nation Contact Group says is necessary to enforce it.

He insisted the force would be led by NATO, something the Serbs have rejected all along — a major obstacle to reaching agreement.

Speaking later, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said "We have not reached full agreement today."

But she added: "We have decisively broken the stalemate that hung over Kosovo for so long."

Albright made it clear that although the ethnic Albanians have agreed in principle to sign the political accord in two weeks, the Serbs have not agreed to the political deal — nor to the military annex.

"Unfortunately (Yugoslav) President Milosevic and his delegation failed to seize the opportunity for progress," she said.

The Serbs "have not engaged at all" on the military aspect, she said.

The prospect of NATO bomb attacks appeared unlikely for at least the next few weeks. Albright, however, said that NATO Secretary-General Javier



French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine (C), US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (R) and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook conduct a press conference in Rambouillet on Tuesday at the end of the Kosovo peace talks. The parties agreed to meet again on March 15. — AFP Photo

Solana retains authority to attack Serb targets if the Serbs violate a ceasefire or refuse, in the end, to agree to NATO peacekeepers.

There was no agreement for a planned NATO force so far, and fighting continued in the Serb province as talks fizzled, with five policemen wounded Tuesday.

The negotiations, in which the two warring parties never talked directly to each other, were to resume March 15.

In addition to rejecting peacekeepers, the Serbs refused to give their consent to major elements of the self-rule the ethnic Albanian Kosovars demanded. Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic nullified plan for self-rule in Kosovo in 1989.

According to senior US officials, the Serbs still insist on Serbian courts for Serbs ac-

caused of crimes in Kosovo, refuse to permit the ethnic Albanians to have a president and are unwilling to cooperate with a war crimes tribunal looking into atrocities against civilians committed during a year-long war that claimed some 2,000 lives.

The Albanians hedged, as well. They were given two weeks for "consultations" with people in the province, and are insisting still on a referendum to vote for independence and secession from Serbia at the end of the three-year autonomy trial period envisioned by the accord formulated by the United States, Britain, France, Italy, Germany and Russia.

The accord also calls for a restoration of the ceasefire that was arranged by US envoy Richard Holbrooke last October and for the staged removal of

Serbian troops and special police units, but only after a NATO force is deployed to enforce the agreement.

The Serbs gave no indication they would agree to NATO peacekeepers, arguing that they could not be sure the Serb minority — the province is about 90 per cent ethnic Albanian — would be protected.

In a concession, the 81-page accord permits the Serbs to keep troops along the Kosovo border.

Final Albanian approval also remains a question mark. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine also said at a news conference that the deal was an incomplete one.

"We will use the next three weeks to convince the Serbs and to convince the Albanians that the agreement is a good bargain for both sides."

Sharif missed 'golden opportunity.' Benazir

Indo-Pak summit positive: Pak PM

ISLAMABAD, Feb 24: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Tuesday said last weekend's India-Pakistan summit would have "positive" impact on relations, but his political foe Benazir Bhutto voiced disappointment, reports AP.

Sharif, quoted by the state-run television, said tension on the border with India would be reduced "considerably" following his talks with Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The Lahore Declaration they signed at the end of the two-day landmark summit in Sunday would bear fruit, he told a university convocation at Bahawalpur in Punjab province.

Sharif expressed the hope that the agreement would usher in an era of peace for the people of South Asia.

In the declaration the two premiers pledged to reduce the risk of a nuclear conflict and to intensify efforts to resolve all issues, including the dispute over the Himalayan state of Kashmir.

Benazir, a former prime minister and now the main opposition leader, said in a state-

ment that the two prime ministers failed to make progress on key issues.

Vajpayee's visit "received much publicity but failed to move ahead in substance," the Pakistan People's Party leader said.

Sharif missed the "golden opportunity" for India and Pakistan to jointly announce the signing of the global Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), she said.

Benazir said Sharif and Vajpayee had pledged before the UN General Assembly last year that they would sign the treaty by September.

"Had Nawaz Sharif any experience of international affairs he could have convinced Vajpayee of the dramatic repercussions for security of South Asia for both sides to announce simultaneously a firm and early date for the signing of the CTBT."

Vajpayee took a historic bus ride to the border city of Lahore to become the first Indian Premier to visit Pakistan in a decade.

The visit was also his first

since India and Pakistan conducted underground nuclear tests in May.

Vajpayee told a joint press conference in Lahore on Sunday that the nuclear issues were discussed but "no decision has been taken" on the CTBT.

Qazi Hussain Ahmad, chief of the main fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) party dubbed Vajpayee's visit an "excursion trip."

He said the summit documents did not address the controversial status of Kashmir, its resolution on the basis of UN resolutions and the deployment of the Indian troops in the valley.

The government has become party to an "international conspiracy aimed at censoring the ... Kashmiri, Mujahadeen," he said in a statement.

The JI, which supports the 10-year separatist movement that has claimed some 25,000 lives in the Indian-held Kashmir, opposed the visit by staging violent demonstrations in Lahore.

One policeman was killed and dozens were injured as JI

activists chanting "Vajpayee murder" and "Vajpayee go back" clashed with security forces during the summit.

The JI chief said establishing trade links, cross border bus service and cultural exchanges, without resolving the Kashmir issue mount to pouring salt on the injury.

PTI adds from Beijing. China yesterday welcomed the recent historic summit of prime ministers of India and Pakistan and hoped the two sides would maintain the momentum of dialogue to resolve their differences peacefully.

"We welcome the summit between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan and the Lahore Declaration signed by both sides," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman's office said.

Meanwhile, all the leading Chinese media gave prominent display and coverage to the bus diplomacy initiated by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the talks he had with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif.

Uzbekistan to withdraw from CIS defence treaty

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan, Feb 24: Uzbek President Islam Karimov confirmed Tuesday that his Central Asian nation plans to withdraw from a joint defence agreement between former Soviet republics, a news report said Tuesday, reports AP.

Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov had announced the plans earlier this month, saying that Uzbekistan opposed what it perceives as Russia's attempts to dominate the alliance, as well as the deployment of Russian troops in several former Soviet republics.

The statement of our Foreign Ministry remains in force," President Karimov told a meeting of ambassadors from some 50 countries, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

Estrada suspends peace talks with communist rebels

MANILA, Feb 24: Philippine President Joseph Estrada announced an indefinite suspension of peace talks with Communist rebels on Wednesday, a week after they abducted a general and another officer in the southern Philippines, reports AP.

"Enough is enough," Estrada said. "We will not tolerate this abuse of our goodwill, of our good faith, and of our deep and abiding commitment to bring peace to our countryside and to our cities."

Estrada also suspended effective Thursday immunity and security guarantees the government had given to 85 senior rebel leaders involved in the peace talks.

"I have thought long and hard about these courses of action," Estrada said in a statement. "But the time and the hour can come when forbearance becomes self-defeating and tolerance less and less a virtue and more and more a mistake."

CPI-ML calls 12-hour Bangla Bandh tomorrow

CALCUTTA, Feb 24: The CPI-ML yesterday called a 12-hour dawn-to-dusk 'Bangla Bandh' on February 26 in protest against 'fascist terror and violence' and to demand justice and democratic rights for the people, reports PTI.

CPI (ML) general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya told a press conference the CPI-ML had demanded that the state government publish a white paper on 'state-sponsored massacres and killing of CPI (ML) and CPMT (M) activists and leaders in the 1970s and if the perpetrators were punished by the Jyoti Basu government."

The CPI (ML) leader, however, accused the Left Front government of 'murdering' the two commissions instituted after 1977 to probe the 'fascist terror of the 70s' and suppressing valuable information and evidence submitted to and available with the government.

Claiming that the bandh called by them had the support of many left organisations, he described the appeal made by the CPI (M) state secretary Anil Biswas to call it as testimony of growing polarity and democratic support for the CPI-ML.

Death penalty for rapists in India likely

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: The government proposes to enact a legislation to provide for death penalty to rapists, Home Minister LK Advani told the Lok Sabha yesterday, reports PTI.

He said though registration, detection and prevention of crimes is primarily the responsibility of the state governments, the centre has been writing to states and union territories from time to time, stressing upon the need to take preventive and punitive measures in connection with crimes against women and weaker sections on society, he said in a written reply.

The home minister said the measures included setting up of women police stations creation of women cells in police stations and recruitment of women in police.

Guarantees sought for foreign aid workers' safety in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Feb 24: A UN special envoy will meet with Taliban Islamic militia leaders in Afghanistan to seek safety guarantees for its foreign aid workers returning to the war-torn country, Pakistani and UN officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi is expected to visit the southwestern Kandahar city — the political center of the Taliban militia — on Saturday.

"But before his visit to Kandahar, the Taliban leaders will meet Brahimi here as well," Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz told The Associated Press.

The visit comes six months after the United Nations pulled out its staffers from Afghanistan because one of its officials was killed.

"The UN has already agreed to send back its international staff to Afghanistan," Aziz said.

"The UN is reviewing security arrangements and waiting for the inquiry report on the killing."

The killing and the wound-

ing of another staffer happened during protests against the US missile attack on Afghanistan.

The US had targeted alleged terrorist training camps of Saudi dissident Osama Bin Laden, whom Washington accuses of masterminding the bombings of US embassies in Africa last year.

Earlier in July 1998, all other foreign aid groups called back foreign staffers from Afghanistan due to a dispute with the Taliban authorities over relocation of offices. The Taliban ordered the aid groups to move offices to dormitories in the outskirts of the capital Kabul.

None of the aid agencies have returned so far amidst security concerns, badly hitting relief operations for the Afghan people.

The Taliban, who rule 90 per cent of Afghanistan, including Kabul, are Sunni Muslims and mostly Pashtun. They are battling the northern-based opposition comprised of ethnic and religious minorities.

British police in shame Report on killing of 'black' teenager sparks nat'l debate

LONDON, Feb 24: Six years after a gang of white youths fatally stabbed a black teen, a report on the killing of Stephen Lawrence, a bright 17-year-old who wanted to become an architect, may cast doubts over the future of London's police commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, and instigate stricter race laws.

The official release Wednesday of the already partially leaked report into the killing of Stephen Lawrence, a bright 17-year-old who wanted to become an architect, may cast doubts over the future of London's police commissioner, Sir Paul Condon, and instigate stricter race laws.

The death of Lawrence, eldest of three children on hard-working Jamaican-born parents who came to Britain 30 years ago, has also come to epitomise what some see as underlying racism in a nation where race riots are rare and anti-racist laws already wide-

ranging.

"Stephen Lawrence died, at least in part, because we have not been sufficiently vigilant against racism in our lives, our attitudes and our society," Liberal Democratic Party leader Paddy Ashdown said Tuesday ... In the real world, all of us share some of the blame."

According to the leaked section, the report says London's overwhelmingly white Metropolitan police force is guilty of "institutional racism."

"It can be seen, or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amounts to discrimination ... which disadvantages ethnic minority people," said the report by retired judge Sir William Macpherson.

Five white men, yelling racial epithets, stabbed Lawrence on April 22, 1993 on a sidewalk in Eltham, southeast London, where he had visited his uncle with a friend, Duwayne Brooks, who is also black.

In the following two days dozens of people called the police station and many identified the suspects, known locally as violent racists.

The faces of the five have since become almost as well known nationally as that of Lawrence.

Brothers Neil and Jamie Acourt, Gary Dobson, Luke Knight and David Norris have never been successfully prosecuted partly because of lack of forensic evidence.

After the killing, surveillance officers had watched the Acourt brothers remove plastic bags from their home but had no video cameras to prove what they had seen.

During the inquiry, which opened in March 1998, the suspects were strutting, brazen and evasive.

Camel named Rambouillet after Kosovo talks venue

BELGRADE, Feb 24: A newly born camel at the Belgrade Zoo has been named "Rambouillet," after the French chateau where the Kosovo peace talks were held, the zoo director told AFP Tuesday.

Among the many suggestions it was Rambouillet that won, Yuk Bojovic said.

"I'm a little worried, however, because the little guy seems rather gloomy and not yet steady on his feet," he added.

Bojovic pointed out that Rambouillet's mother Aisha, was a present to the zoo by Libyan Leader Moammar Gaddafi.

Int'l panel meets to decide on disarmament of Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 24: An international panel of experts met for the first time Tuesday to take a fresh look at ways to complete the disarmament of Iraq, which has been stymied for six months, reports AP.

With a stack of technical reports in front of them, the 20-member panel began four days of meetings that initially will focus on assessing the state of the eight-year UN effort to rid Iraq of its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the long-range missiles to deliver them.

"I'm very hopeful ... that the panel will be able to have a fresh look at this dossier and enable the Security Council to take the policy decisions," panel chairman and Brazilian UN Ambassador Celso Amorim

said before the closed-door meeting began.

The council, however, remains deeply divided on what that policy should be.

It is likely to take weeks, if not months, for council members to agree on key issues such as the lifting of sanctions against Iraq.

The council agreed Jan 30 to create three panels as a first modest step to breaking the diplomatic impasse that followed US and British airstrikes on Iraq in mid-December.

The panels are expected to make recommendations by April 15 on re-establishing an effective disarmament programme in Iraq, on improving the humanitarian situation in the country, and on what to do about looted property and hun-

dreds of people who disappeared after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The invasion touched off the Gulf War.

The humanitarian panel will meet March 1-2 and the Kuwait panel on March 3-4.

The Security Council authorised the panels to travel — and one of the key issues expected to be discussed this week is whether panel members should try to visit Iraq for an on-the-spot assessment.

The Iraqi leadership called the creation of the panels "procrastination," saying Baghdad wasn't consulted and the assessments would only delay the lifting of economic sanctions imposed after the war. After the December airstrikes, Iraq banned UNSCOM from returning.



Cambodian Queen Monineath Sihanouk greets dignitaries as she arrives and walks through a display of signs on the awareness of landmines at Chaktomouk national conference centre, Phnom Penh, on Wednesday, at the commencement of Mine Awareness Day. King Norodom Sihanouk was not able to attend the function because of illness. Cambodia marked its annual mine awareness day with the call for deminers and dignitaries for the universal signing and adoption of the Ottawa Convention barring the use of landmines. — AFP Photo

Off the Record

Message in a bottle, after 72 years!

JERUSALEM: In 1926, a group of French soldiers stationed in a historic Middle East fortress put a simple message in a bottle for those who would follow: We were here.

Seventy-two years later, an Israeli park ranger found the message — and wants to track down the senders, a spokesman said Monday, reports AP.

An employee of the Kalaat Namroud National Park in the Golan Heights found the tattered, yellowed letter sticking out of a broken bottle on Sunday in the walls of an army barracks used by French troops in the 1920s, Parks Authority spokesman Ofer Greenstein said.

The letter, dated October 1926, declares "these buildings have been made by the soldiers of the French Army... Let the one who will find this document keep it as a souvenir." The letter is signed by four soldiers and three workers who apparently built the barracks inside a cliffside Crusader fortress.

Parks Authority archaeologist Tzvi Tzok examined the document Monday and said the type of paper, the message content and its location proved its authenticity.

It's unlikely, however, that the soldiers anticipated how many times their barracks would change hands.

From 1920-1946, the French were stationed on the Golan Heights, located in French-mandated Syria, near the border of British-ruled Palestine. The Golan passed to Syria in 1946 when it won independence, and was captured by Israel in the 1967 middle East war.

Pot-bellied pigs lead a merry chase

ENGLAND: A couple of dozen Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, abandoned in a wood in southeast England, have led rescuers a merry chase for days, reports AP.

"There are at least three piglets and a sow still in the woods and half a dozen inspectors trying to track them down," Wendy Shaw of the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals said Tuesday. RSPCA officers have caught 19 of the black, hairy beasts since Friday.

The sow in particular is proving a tricky customer and giving us quite a run-around," she said. "Of course, there may be others there which we just haven't spotted yet."

RSPCA inspector Chris Bacon is one of those giving chase, but animal lovers need have no fear that his name is ominously significant. The organisation says the animals will be "re-homed."

The pigs are fast-moving, strong and agile and some of the fully-grown sows caught so far have weighed as much as 200 pounds (90 kg).

The fugitive animals are believed to have been dumped in the wood near Tiptree — about 60 km east of London — by an owner who could no longer cope or a trader who could not sell them.

The animals became popular pets in the 1980s, but they tend to grow too big, unruly and expensive for owners to cope with, RSPCA chief inspector Andy Mitchell said Tuesday.

India makes no promise to US to sign N-test ban treaty: FM

NEW DELHI, Feb 24: India has made no promise yet to the United States that it would sign the nuclear test ban treaty by September this year, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Wednesday, reports AP.

The government has a clear and unambiguous no to the question," Singh said in parliament when asked if media speculation that New Delhi had agreed to endorse the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was true.

"There is not an iota of truth in what the press has reported," Singh said.

Singh is representing India at a series of talks on the test ban issue with US negotiator Strobe Talbott, who is trying to nudge India to sign the CTBT so that it can come into force by September.

The discussions between Singh and Talbott began after India carried out a series of underground nuclear tests last May, provoking neighbor and rival Pakistan into matching tests. Eight rounds of talks have been held so far.

Sources on both sides had said after the last round of talks this month that India was ready to sign the treaty, provided economic sanctions imposed after its nuclear tests last year are lifted.

Publicly, both sides say that formula should not be seen as a tradeoff, reflecting India's sensitivity at being seen as bowing to US demands.

Singh was criticized by opposition members in India's lower house of parliament Wednesday for what they called slow progress in the nuclear talks.

"A mountain of labor has produced a mouse," Congress Party lawmaker P.J. Kurien said.



A man walks past a mural of former White House intern Monica Lewinsky in Los Angeles on Tuesday. The mural, signed Hector Pance, was painted in an abandoned building in the city. — AFP photo