

Pakistan ready to hold talks with India anytime

ISLAMABAD, June 6: Pakistan today repeated calls for a dialogue with arch-rival India to ease the tension over Kashmir, saying it was ready to hold talks anytime, reports Reuter.

"For us, there is no constraint, but we need to hear from them," Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz told Reuters.

Diplomatic efforts to end the tense stand-off in Kashmir were set back on Saturday when India rejected as inconvenient a Pakistani proposal for Aziz to travel to New Delhi on Monday for the talks.

"Obviously, a meeting can take place only on a date convenient to both sides. We are waiting to hear what date is convenient for them," Aziz said.

The Himalayan region has been the cause of two of the three wars the nuclear-capable foes have fought since winning independence from Britain in 1947.

The crisis escalated almost two weeks ago when India started using air strikes to try to dislodge guerrillas New Delhi says crossed into its side of the disputed Himalayan region with Pakistani backing. Islamabad denies the charge.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had offered last week to send Aziz to New Delhi. India accepted the offer but has not agreed to a date, rejecting the proposal to meet on Monday

as "not convenient".

Aziz said he thought the delay may be because India was waiting for its troops to gain an upper hand in the bid to push the guerrillas out of strategic heights in northern Kashmir.

"It's probably to get some improvement in the ground situation," he said.

Sharif was quoted in local newspapers today as saying he did not want the dispute to escalate further.

"It is the responsibility of leaders on both sides to see the writing on the wall and not allow the situation to slip out of their hands," he was quoted by The News as saying in the central city of Lahore.

He said the dispute over Kashmir, which both countries claim, should be resolved through negotiations once and for all.

India says the campaign against the "Pakistan-backed infiltrators" will continue until they are pushed out of the country.

Pakistan says the militants are local Kashmiris fighting for their right to self-determination and accuses India of escalating the situation by its first use of air power against the guerrillas since the present anti-India revolt erupted in Kashmir in early 1990.

India controls two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan the rest.

Kashmir border clashes continue after talks ruled out

Indian army hands over bodies of 3 Pak soldiers

Srinagar, India, June 6: Indian and Pakistani troops

Sunday remained locked in artillery battles in Kashmir with no sign of immediate peace.

talks between the two South Asian rivals, officials said, remain imminent.

Saturday's lack of Indian aerial strikes against the heavily armed guerrillas after an uninterrupted 11-day campaign also fuelled the speculation.

The Indian Express said "the decisive phase" of the Kashmir operation was about to start and an Indian military build-up in the border area "is now virtually complete."

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars since independence from Britain in 1947 over Kashmir, a picturesquely state which both claim.

India launched a military campaign on Kashmir's LoC four weeks ago to dislodge hundreds of Islamic guerrillas who have occupied strategic hills in Indian Kashmir.

On May 26, India for the first time resorted to air strikes against the rebels, causing tensions with Pakistan to soar a year after both countries conducted nuclear weapons tests.

India has lost two fighter

planes during the Kashmiri air campaign, at least one shot down by Pakistani forces, while the guerrillas have also downed an Indian military helicopter.

India says Pakistani troops are directly involved in the fighting. Islamabad has rejected the charge, and says it is prepared to talk to New Delhi to end the crisis.

Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh warned overnight Saturday that New Delhi was ready for talks "but we want to make it clear that we will not talk out of fear."

Singh also told state-run television that India considered as "irresponsible" a reported Pakistani claim that the LoC in Kashmir was not clearly demarcated.

Pakistan Sunday said the Indian army had handed over the bodies of three soldiers, adding that they were killed when Indian troops attacked one of its positions on May 31.

A military spokesman rejected as "false and baseless" an Indian report that the Pakistani soldiers had been fighting on the Indian side of the border in Kashmir.

He said the soldiers died

when their "reconnaissance patrol was ambushed by 30-40 Indian soldiers on the Line of Control (border) in Chorbat La sector."

"Although during the ensuing fire fight the Indians withdrew, they also took along these three personnel," the spokesman added.

"It is highly regrettable that the Indian army falsely depicted that these persons were martyred inside (Indian-held) Kashmir."

The spokesman said the Pakistani army had reported the incident on May 31 when it clearly stated that these three personnel embraced shahadat (martyrdom) on the Line of Control in Chorbat La sector.

He said Pakistan continued to exercise restraint but the Indian Army was "escalating the present volatile situation by levelling false and baseless allegations."

The bodies were handled over Saturday evening. India said they were found six to seven kilometers inside Indian Kashmir and this proved that Pakistani troops were fighting alongside Islamic guerrilla infiltrators.

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A Kashmiri woman, baby in tow, picks up her bags before boarding a bus on its way to Minji on Friday as heavy shelling between Indian and Pakistani artillery continues in the Drass sector.

— AFP photo

Anwar back in the dock on new charge

KUALA LUMPUR, June 6: Almost two months into his six-year sentence on four charges of corruption, Malaysia's ousted deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim returns to court on Monday to face a new charge of sodomy, reports AFP.

With a sweeping gag order imposed on reporters covering Anwar's second trial in eight months, lawyers appear divided over the level of public interest in the latest proceedings -- which coincide with increased talk of early elections.

"This is a serious charge and involves a heavy sentence," one lawyer said, referring to the maximum penalty of 20 years and whipping for sodomy in Malaysia. He predicted that a "spectacular drama" was about to unfold.

But another senior lawyer disagreed. "The sex trial won't attract as much public interest as the previous corruption case," he said.

Anwar, 51, was fired by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and expelled from the ruling party in September last

year amid differences over economic policy.

After leading the biggest anti-government protests here in decades, he was arrested as a threat to national security and beaten up by the then chief of police before eventually being charged with 10 counts of corruption and sodomy.

Anwar's wife Azizah has since started her own political party and forged an alliance with other parties seeking to oust the 73-year-old Mahathir, who has ruled for 18 years and is now the longest serving leader in Southeast Asia.

Although the current parliamentary term does not expire until April next year, many political observers expect Mahathir to go for an early election given recent signs of economic recovery.

Anwar himself alleged in late April that the "top leadership" of the main ruling party "wants the false sex charges to be reported extensively with the aim of tarnishing my image for election purposes."



The mother (C) of 30-year-old Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighter Garni Doci from Kosovo mourns with family members over the grave of her son in a Kukes cemetery yesterday. Garni was killed two days ago near Krume, along the Albanian-Yugoslav border, during fights with Serbian forces.

— AFP photo

Congress leading in Indian state election

NEW DELHI, June 6: India's main opposition party headed by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi is heading towards a morale-boosting win in a crucial state election, officials said today.

The Congress party had bagged 14 of the 25 seats whose results had been declared in the small western state of Goa, and election projections showed it could gain a majority in the 40-member assembly.

India's ruling Hindu nationalists made significant gains but were trailing a poor second, while smaller regional groups suffered humiliating defeats, domestic news agencies reported.

A Congress win would give Goa, a former Portuguese colony better known for its beaches, a single-party government for the first time since 1984.

Some 65 per cent of Goa's one million electorate voted Friday in an election which drew national interest because of upcoming countrywide parliamentary polls.

The Goa ballot was also the first popularity test for Gandhi, who faced an unexpected revolt within the Congress party last month over her foreign origins.

The 52-year-old Gandhi, however, campaigned for her party candidates last week and vowed to give Goa a stable Congress government.

Bhutan enters TV age

THIMPHU, Jun 6: The capital of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is used to television — to watch videos of Hollywood blockbusters and skin flicks hot off the Drak Air flight from Bangkok, reports Reuters.

Many residents have set up satellite dishes, breaking a law that is never enforced. Television sales shot up during the soccer World Cup in France last year.

But now the conservative Buddhist country has its own television station — the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), which went on the air on Wednesday, the king's silver jubilee.

It is far more sober-minded than "Big Bust in Little China" and Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Conan the Barbarian", a couple of choices on offer at a downtown video store.

The launching of Bhutan's television is a part of His Majesty's vision to open the eyes of the Bhutanese people, to improve their awareness and to make them better citizens," Finance Minister Lyonpo Yesi Zimba said.

It is aimed primarily at education and nation-building for a tiny, impoverished country emerging from decades of isolation in the mountains between India and China.

With under-15s accounting for 43 per cent of the population of 600,000-700,000, the advent of television and the Internet has raised worries how society will cope with images from the materialist, violent, sex-obsessed West.

Bhutan's planned development has aimed at shielding people from shocks to their culture, summed up in the king's pursuit of Gross National Happiness through a balance between spiritual and material development.

Indian jailed for spying for Pakistan

NEW DELHI, June 6: An Indian has been jailed for almost 10 years on charges of spying for Pakistan, the Press Trust of India reported Sunday, reports AFP.

The news agency said Daniel Masih, alias Peter Parkash, was jailed by a court in the northern city of Ludhiana for allegedly supplying maps of Indian military airports to a Pakistani contact. He was arrested last August.

The King's modernisation programme has helped per capita gross domestic product more than quadruple in the last 10 years to around \$550.

That still puts Bhutan among the world's poorest countries but more and more people have been buying televisions.

What videos people watch in private is up to them. And officials say the progressive 43-year-old monarch tacitly acknowledges the ban on satellite dishes is useless.

"Why try to grip something that is slipping in your hands? It is better to let go and guide it," one senior civil servant told Reuters.

Three soldiers were believed to have been killed.

Renewed fighting since December between rebel fighters and government troops has taken a heavy toll in this central African country, where about 10,000 people had been killed in a civil war in 1997.

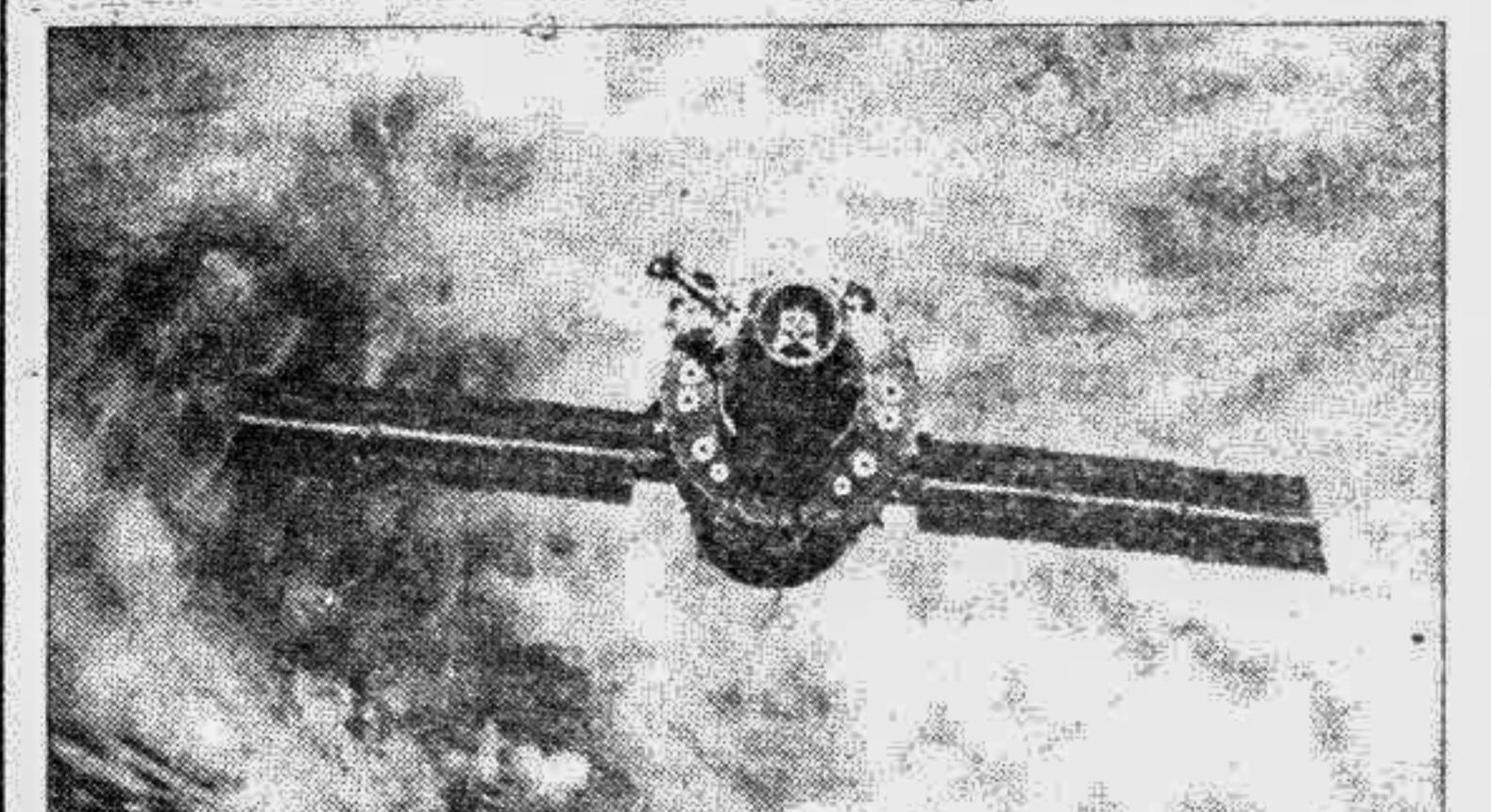
Discovery returns to earth

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, June 6: The US space shuttle Discovery landed at the Kennedy Space Center here today after a 10-day mission on the International Space Station (ISS), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said, reports AFP.

Discovery returned to Earth in the early hours of Sunday in a flawless touch-down at 1:03 a.m. (0603 GMT).

This was the 11th night landing since the first US shuttle mission in 1981.

Discovery's seven-member crew were forced to work at night since take-off due to technical constraints of their historic rendez-vous with ISS.



The International Space Station is seen from the US space shuttle Discovery as the shuttle does a fly around after undocking with the station. The Discovery and her seven-person crew returned to earth yesterday after the ten-day space mission.

— AFP photo

Indonesia to vote in first free elections in four decades



East Timorese residents prepare polling booths for the Indonesia general election in the Vilaverde district of Dili yesterday. East Timor will take part in the Indonesian national election today.

JAKARTA, June 6: Indonesians go to the polls Monday to choose from an overwhelming array of 48 parties, hoping to turn the page on three decades of iron-fisted rule under then-president Suharto, reports AFP.

Some 112 million of the 130 million eligible voters have registered to take part in the elections which the government of Suharto's successor, President B.J. Habibie, has pledged will be the freest and fairest since the 1955 polls under founding president Sukarno.

But despite jubilant campaigns by many of the larger parties, given free political expression for the first time, many remain sceptical.

"It is difficult to imagine impartiality, especially among government officials in remote regions after such a long tradition of backing the ruling Golkar party," said Kusnarto Anggoro, of the private Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The view was echoed by sociologist Lukman Surisno of the Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta who said the ruling Golkar party may still benefit from official support in rural areas.

Golkar, Suharto's political vehicle during his 32-year rule, relied heavily on the bureaucracy and the military for its landslide victories in the last six elections.

"We have practically no previous experience of holding free and fair elections," Anggoro said, adding most Indonesians were born after the 1955 elections or were too young to take part.

But he acknowledged that local participation in monitoring and supervising the ballot was encouraged, the vote could be credible.

Although the country has heaved a sigh of relief that the 17-day campaign period passed without serious violence -- such as the bloody riots that preceded Suharto's fall in May 1998 -- analysts and a poll monitoring group have warned the worst may yet to come.

A frustrated party could spark major discontent.

The political culture of being able to graciously accept defeat is not yet formed among us," Anggoro said.

There is bound to be problems in the post-election period. Even if the polls were honest and fair, there is still no cul-
ture of accepting defeat," added Sutrisno.

Fact file on Indonesia

Geography: Indonesia is an archipelago of more than 17,000 islands stretching 5,000 kilometres (3,100 miles) north and south of the Equator. Only 6,000 of the islands are inhabited.

The main islands are Java, Sumatra, Borneo (shared with Malaysia and Brunei) and Sulawesi.

Population: 206 million. The ethnic Chinese community makes up only five percent of the population but accounts for much of the wealth.

Capital: Jakarta, with more than 10 million residents.

Languages: Indonesian. There are also 600 other languages and dialects.

Religion: Multi-religious. Moslems account for close to 90 percent of the population, with Christians, Hindus and Buddhists making up the rest.

History: A former Dutch colony, Indonesia declared independence in 1945 and this was recognised four years later. Its founding father and first president was Ahmed Sukarno.

General Suharto came to power in March 1966 after the brutal suppression of an attempted coup the previous October. About 500,000 people died in the crackdown on the coup, which was blamed on the Indonesian communist party.

The sole presidential candidate, he was officially elected in 1972, reelected in 1978 and every five years since then.

Six weeks after having been elected for a seventh term, he was forced to step down on May