

Govt in contact with militants: Pak FM

ISLAMABAD, July 11: Pakistan's foreign minister Sunday said he was hopeful Muslim fighters would agree to withdraw from strategic peaks in Kashmir and defuse the current tensions with India, reports AFP.

Sartaj Aziz said the government was in contact with militant groups after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised the United States he would persuade them to vacate the heights.

Aziz said he was optimistic the contacts would be fruitful, despite the fighters' stated reluctance to leave the heights they captured in April in Indian-held Kashmir.

"I hope so," Aziz told AFP, when asked whether the contacts would produce positive results.

"Our main emphasis is to de-escalate the short-term Kargil crisis and defuse tensions."

Aziz said the prime minister met representatives of Kashmiri militant groups on Friday and the process was continuing at other levels as well.

He said there was no time-frame for a withdrawal from the heights, where India claims

it is battling Pakistani regulars, as well as the "mujahideen" militants.

Pakistan denies involvement of its troops and calls the militants indigenous freedom fighters.

Sharif, who agreed in his July 4 talks with US President Bill Clinton in Washington that Pakistan would use its influence to bring about a withdrawal, is expected to explain the accord in a nationwide address.

A spokesman for the United Jihad (holy war) Council, an umbrella body of some 15 militant groups, said Saturday the mujahideen did not favour a withdrawal.

However, the sources said several council members were individually inclined to accept the Pakistani appeal after Sharif's assurance this would send a positive signal to the international community.

Sharif had also assured the mujahideen Pakistan would continue to extend political, moral and diplomatic support for the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination, they said.

India claims victory in two Kashmir battle zones

NEW DELHI, July 11: The Indian army on Sunday said it had evicted almost all Muslim infiltrators and their Pakistani backers in two key battlezones in disputed Kashmir, reports AFP.

Major General J.J. Singh told reporters here that "almost all enemy position has been cleared" in Drass and Batalik areas "barring one or two which are on the LoC (Line of Control)."

The winding LoC divides the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

These two sub-sectors of critical tactical importance are thus free of enemy interference. The Indian army now controls these two sectors effectively.

Singh also said chiefs of India and Pakistan's military operations met on Sunday for the first time since the conflict flared in the sector of Kargil in Indian-administered Kashmir on May 9.

"At the request of the Pakistani government a meeting of

the Director General of Military Operations was held at 1.30 pm (0800 GMT) in Attari on the Indian side of the border," Singh said, adding the meeting was on.

"The outcome of the meeting will be known later today."

Brigadier Arun Chopra told reporters here that heavy fighting was still raging elsewhere in the Himalayan state despite Pakistan's calls to Islamic guerrillas to withdraw from Indian Kashmir.

He said "there are no signs of withdrawal" by the Pakistan-backed guerrillas, whose occupation of strategic hills in Indian Kashmir sparked a massive Indian military offensive two months ago.

The Indian claim came amid Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz's statement in Islamabad that he was hopeful the guerrillas would agree to pull back and defuse tensions with India.

India has pledged to continue with its military offen-

sive, which had threatened to trigger a war with Pakistan, until the guerrillas retreated to Pakistan-held Kashmir.

Chopra said Indian troops had reached the Line of Control (LoC) border which divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan at Batalik, one of the four main battlezones.

"At Batalik we are near the LoC," he said. "There is no enemy resistance."

"We are collecting whatever arms and ammunition the enemy has left behind," he said, speaking at the army's headquarters for Kashmir here.

"There are mopping up operations to be done, including defusal of land mines."

The officer said Indian troops had also captured two more mountain peaks -- Rock-ino and Rocky Knob -- elsewhere, losing four men in fighting overnight which left nine Pakistani soldiers dead.

India says it is fighting both Islamic guerrillas, including Pakistanis, as well as Pak-

istani troops. Islamabad denies its involvement in the fighting. Indian fighter jets also bombed Sunday guerrillas still holding on in the mountains at Mushkoh Valley and Kaksar.

Also Sunday, the Indian military displayed the bodies of two Pakistani army officers allegedly killed in Kashmir.

Chopra said the bodies -- placed in wooden coffins and shown to reporters at an army complex -- were those of captains Karnal Sher and Imtiaz Malik of Pakistan's North Light Infantry.

He declined to say if the bodies, recovered in Drass sector, would be returned to Pakistan.

Army officers said they recovered from the bodies official identity cards, other documents linking them to the Pakistan army and letters sent by their families.

India says it has captured one Pakistani soldier, returned the bodies of three others to the Pakistani military, and buried several more in the icy peaks of Kashmir.



President of the Congress (I) Party Sonia Gandhi (R) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) attend an all-party meeting on the issue of the Kashmir conflict yesterday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

17 killed in Indian truck accident:

Seventeen people were killed in central India when a truck in which they were travelling overturned on a highway, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported yesterday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

Three others were injured in the accident, which occurred late Saturday near Tikamgarh town in Madhya Pradesh state. The dead included seven women.

Australian FM in Beijing:

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and his party arrived in Beijing yesterday on a five-day official visit to China at the invitation of Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan. Xinhua reports from Beijing.

This is Downer's third China trip since he became Australian foreign minister. In addition to Beijing, Downer will also visit Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

Spain seizes 15 tons of cocaine:

Spain claimed one of its biggest victories in a recent anti-drug operations, including the seizure of 10 tons of cocaine aboard a ship. Xinhua reports from Madrid.

A total of 15 tons of cocaine was seized, and about 60 persons, including 10 Spaniards, eight Colombians, a Mexican and several Russians detained in the operations, announced National Police General Director Juan Cotino in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria (Canary Islands), on Saturday.

Cholera kills 31 in Nigeria:

An outbreak of cholera has killed 31 people in southeast Nigerian state of Enugu, a top official said in reports Sunday. AFP reports from Lagos.

Commissioner for Health Simon Idike said the victims were among the 211 cases reported in two local government areas in the state last week, the newspaper Daily Champion reported. He said the state government had taken some control measures, including health education and distribution of drugs, to stem the infection.



Thousands of supporters of pro-reformist Iranian President Mohammad Khatami hold up his portrait during a rally yesterday in Tehran. Speakers at the rally of some 20,000 students demanded an explanation from Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, after a bloody police crackdown reportedly left five dead and dozens more seriously wounded. — AFP photo

Threat to kill Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, July 11: The Malaysian government is investigating a tape recording of an unidentified speech calling for the assassination of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, officials said Sunday, reports AFP.

The deputy minister in the prime minister's department, Ibrahim Ali, was quoted as saying by the Bernama news agency that he received the cassette entitled "Shit" on Friday.

A leaflet attached to the cassette claimed those involved had 24.5 million ringgit (6.5 million dollars) in their coffers to reproduce the recording for distribution, Ibrahim said.

The cassette allegedly contained the speech of an unidentified opposition leader who quoted Islamic verses in his call for the premier to be killed, Bernama said.

A government official told AFP that this was the second

taped threat to be received. A police report was lodged over the first cassette obtained in April and an investigation is ongoing.

Mahathir, president of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) -- the backbone of the ruling coalition -- has been dogged by a party rift after sacking his deputy Anwar Ibrahim last September.

Anwar, who was later arrested and sentenced to six years' jail in April for abuse of power, is now on trial again on a charge of sodomy.

Second Finance Minister Mustafa Mohamed, who is a senior UMNO member, said Sunday similar cassettes were distributed to teachers and schools calling for UMNO leaders to be killed.

"I have heard a cassette and my name (is) included in the death threat list," he was cited as saying by Bernama.

Students continue protests in Iran

TEHRAN, July 11: Thousands of masked students took to the streets of Tehran for a fourth straight day Sunday to demand the sacking of Iran's hardline police chief as the authorities failed to quell growing anger over a bloody police crackdown, reports AFP.

More than 20,000 students turned out for the protest -- the largest since the wave of campus protests began on Thursday and the biggest outpouring of popular anger here since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Not satisfied with official announcements condemning Friday's deadly police raid on a campus dormitory, student leaders gave the authorities until 5 p.m. (1230 GMT) to sack General Hedayat Lotfian, the hardline police chief they hold responsible.

Demonstration organisers also demanded that the authori-

ties return the bodies of the students killed by police or face escalating protests.

Five students were killed in Friday's raid and dozens more who were wounded have disappeared at the hands of the secret police, newspapers here reported Sunday.

"Several dozen students who were seriously wounded are in the hands of intelligence officials and all efforts to find out what happened to them have so far failed," an unnamed university official told the leading reformist newspaper Khorshid.

To prevent any repetition of the raid, student leaders called for the whole of the security services to be placed under the direct control of the reformist government of President Mohammad Khatami and launched unprecedented calls for accountability from the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Speakers at the rally of some 20,000 students at the capital's riot-torn Amirabad campus repeatedly called for "explanations" from Khamenei, an unprecedented challenge in Iran where it is forbidden to question the Islamic republic's supreme leader.

Some in the crowd also chanted slogans charging Khamenei with supporting hardline Islamic militants who regularly attack Iranian liberals and moderates.

Khamenei, successor to the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who founded the Islamic republic after the 1979 revolution that deposed the shah, has ultimate control over the nation's security forces.

Khamenei has yet to comment directly on the unrest but on Saturday a council of his personal representatives to

Iran's universities condemned "irresponsible" elements as well as the police for causing the bloodshed.

The fresh wave of student protests came despite the announcement late Saturday that the nation's top security body had sacked the officer responsible for ordering Friday's raid.

Security chiefs did not name the officer but after an emergency meeting chaired by Khatami, they condemned his "deplorable" action and called on the students to remain calm while the authorities investigated.

On Sunday, Khatami again expressed confidence that the students would exercise "self-restraint" as he rejected the resignation of his higher education minister and key ally Mostafa Mo'in in protest at the students' deaths.

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N Korea urges US to renew armistice pact

SEOUL, July 11: North Korea urged Washington today to renew the Korean War armistice pact, saying a naval clash between the two Koreas last month would never have happened if an updated agreement had been in place, reports Reuters.

"We have already advanced a landmark overture on establishing a new peace mechanism between the DPRK (North Korea) and the United States to replace the outworn and defunct armistice agreement," the north's official Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) quoted local newspaper Rodong Shinmun as saying.

The report did not say when Pyongyang made the offer.

"If the US had responded to the DPRK's proposal, such an

armed conflict would not have occurred. If the state of fragile ceasefire develops into war any moment, the United States will be wholly responsible for this," the paper said.

North and South Korea navy ships exchanged fire on June 15 after more than a week of stand-offs in the Yellow Sea, the first naval clash there since the 1950-1953 Korean War.

Seoul said it sank a North Korean torpedo vessel and severely damaged several others during an exchange of gunfire on June 15. Pyongyang said it sank more than 10 South Korean vessels.

North and South Korea have remained technically at war since 1953, because the Korean War ended in an armed truce instead of a peace agreement.

Nationwide offensive 64 rebels killed in Colombia

BOGOTA, July 11: At least 64 Marxist rebels taking part in a nationwide offensive have been killed in fighting with government security forces across Colombia over the past 24 hours, the army said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

Army and police chiefs said at least six civilians and three policemen died and a handful of people were injured as rebels attacked 15 towns, bombed banks, blew up bridges and energy infrastructure, blocked roads and assaulted police barracks.

The upsurge in violence came less than 48 hours after heavy clashes in mountains on the edge of Bogota left up to 78 people dead -- about half of them members of a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel unit that was said to be planning raids on the capital.

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas suffered 38 losses near the town of Hato Corozal, in oil-rich, eastern Casanare province, the spokesman said. Another 19 were killed as they tried to overrun a police barracks in the town of Doncello, in southern Cauca province.

Interior Minister Nestor Humberto Martinez said heavy fighting was continuing after midnight in the jungle towns of Puerto Lleras and Puerto Lopez in eastern Meta province. Military brass had lost all contact with army and police units after they came under attack from the FARC.

In a bid to contain the rebel

offensive, Martinez clamped sweeping curfew measures on 10 of the country's 32 provinces, including 10 towns on the outskirts of Bogota. Residents were allowed to move freely, however, within towns and villages.

Political analysts described the attacks as a show of strength designed to boost the FARC's bargaining position in the latest round of peace talks aimed at ending the long-running war that has claimed 35,000 lives in 10 years.

But in recent Reuters interviews with rebel warlords, it is clear that the FARC is using the talks, going ahead without any prior ceasefire deal, to carve out political space while pressing on with plans to seize power by force.

Fresh negotiations had been due to start this week but were postponed until July 20 because of what both sides said were "logistical problems."

We have problems in 15 towns at this moment because of rebel attacks and raids," said Gen. Francisco Pedraza, head of the army's 7th Brigade and coordinator of defensive operations. "The (guerrillas) asked for the peace talks to be delayed so that they could carry out these terrorist acts."

The FARC and smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) have a combined fighting force of some 20,000 combatants and control up to half the country, mostly rural areas.

The two groups last staged a nationwide offensive, in which more than 140 security force members died, in early August.

Palestinians protest settlements ahead of Arafat-Barak summit

EREZ CROSSING, Gaza Strip, July 11: Hundreds of Palestinians protested against Jewish settlement building Sunday near the site of a planned summit meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and PLO leader Yasser Arafat, reports AFP.

The crowd of about 400 men, women and children also called on Barak to release hundreds of Palestinians held prisoner in Israeli jails.

"No Peace With Settlements" and "Prisoners Must Be Released" read banners carried by the Palestinians, some of whom

also held pictures of relatives jailed in Israel.

The prisoner issue and a recent rash of land grabs and building projects by Jewish settlers in the West Bank and in Arab parts of east Jerusalem were expected to figure prominently when Barak and Arafat hold their first official meeting at Erez later Sunday.

The Palestinians have demanded that Barak's new government, which took office Tuesday, freeze all settlement construction pending planned negotiations between the two sides on a permanent peace agreement for the occupied territories.

The Palestinians also want Barak to dismantle about 40 hilltop outposts established by settlers in the West Bank during the final months of the outgoing government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu's right-wing administration retroactively authorized more than 30 of the enclaves and Barak has not yet said whether he will let those decisions stand.

Israel committed itself to releasing 750 Palestinian prisoners as part of the Wye River accord which was signed last autumn. But after freeing a first batch of 250 detainees, Netanyahu suspended the agreement.

Netanyahu further angered the Palestinians by including 150 common criminals in the first group released, saying he would not free any prisoners with Israeli "blood on their hands."



Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and unidentified advisors wait for the beginning of the first meeting of his new coalition government yesterday in Jerusalem. Barak is also expected to meet Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for the first time as prime minister later on today. — AFP photo

Manila lifts ban on Ramos-Horta

MANILA, July 11: The Philippines has shifted its policy on East Timor by lifting a ban on pro-independence leader Jose Ramos-Horta and officially meeting with Bishop Carlos Belo, a senior diplomat said Sunday, reports AFP.

Manila decided to lift the ban on Ramos-Horta visiting the country because the government has observed that the 48-year-old Nobel Peace Prize laureate has a "moderating influence in East Timor," said the diplomat, who did not want to be named.

Philippine ambassador to Jakarta Leonides Caday also last week officially met with Bishop Belo in a three-day visit to Dili, during which he called for peace between warring pro-independence and pro-integration factions.

The Philippine government had earlier maintained a ban on Ramos-Horta to keep a sound diplomatic relation with Jakarta, a fellow member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Ramos-Horta has been in exile since Indonesia annexed the former Portuguese colony in 1975, in a move that has never been recognized by the United Nations.

However, the Indonesian government has since agreed to hold a historic referendum in East Timor to determine its fate. Voting is tentatively scheduled for August 21-23.

The Philippines is the only ASEAN member among the six countries picked by President BJ Habibie to assist in the referendum. Manila earlier sent six policemen to serve in the 280-man unarmed civilian police group.



Techno enthusiasts surround one of the sound system trucks as the 'Love Parade' passes through Berlin's city centre on Saturday. As temperature rose to 30 degrees centigrade, more than one million techno 'ravers' joined the 11th Love Parade, which has become one of the world's biggest outdoor parties. — AFP photo