

US official says
Kashmir issue
can trigger
Indo-Pak war

WASHINGTON, Feb 3: Kashmir issue could trigger war between India and Pakistan and the continued rivalry between the two countries could have an impact on Washington security interests, two top US officials warned yesterday, reports PTI.

The row between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir is most likely to trigger war between the two countries. The state was the site of major fighting in 1947, 1965 and 1971 and again witnessed heavy military action in 1999. CIA Director General J Tenet and Defence Intelligence Agency Director Vice Admiral Thomas R Wilson told the Senate select committee on intelligence.

With Islamabad and New Delhi's respective positions on Kashmir firmly entrenched, meaningful progress on the issue is unlikely in the near future, they said.

Tenet said the rise to power of military ruler General Pervaiz Musharraf in Pakistan and emergence of a coalition government in India have worsened Indo-Pak suspicions and tensions. He feared a wider and more dangerous conflict on the subcontinent.

ISLAMABAD, Feb 3: Pakistan said late Wednesday an opportunity to promote peace and stability in the region would be lost if US President Bill Clinton does not include Pakistan during his south Asian tour next month, reports AFP.

Pakistan's exclusion from President Clinton's tour will be regrettable as it will mean the loss of an opportunity for peace and stability in the region, state television quoted a foreign office spokesman as saying.

Clinton is due to arrive in New Delhi on March 20 and will stay in India for five days, before making a one-day visit to Bangladesh.

According to the television report, the spokesman said "no decision has been taken by Clinton about his visit to Pakistan."

But he said while it was up to President Clinton to make a decision, Pakistan had made it clear the visit would provide an opportunity to promote understanding between Islamabad

US Navy searches Russian ship

DUBAI, Feb 3: The US Navy boarded a Russian vessel in the Gulf of Oman on Wednesday night on suspicion that it was smuggling Iraqi oil in violation of a UN embargo, a US naval commander said today, reports AFP.

A US Navy team, acting as part of the Multi-National Maritime Interception Force (MIF), boarded the ship in international water, commander Jeff Graeck, spokesman for the force, told AFP.

"We believe that it was carrying illegal petroleum products from Iraq," he said. "The tanker Volgofelt-147 is in international waters in the Gulf of Oman."

Details of what the inspection turned up were not yet available, Graeck added by telephone from the MIF base in Bahrain.

The Russian-flagged vessel had "failed to respond to rou-

tine queries regarding its intentions," the commander said.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Jim Kout had announced the boarding.

The Russian crew and captain cooperated with the operation, he said.

NBC television network reported that the US suspected that two Russian ships had been transporting Iraqi oil for several weeks, hugging the coast of Iran "to elude the US Navy."

The US State Department made a formal complaint to the Russians last week, but when the smuggling did not stop, the Pentagon ordered the Navy to board the ship, the network reported.

The MIF, made up mainly of the US Fifth Fleet and British vessels, has cruised Gulf waters to try to enforce an international embargo in effect since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.



Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat (R) speaks with the US Mideast peace envoy Dennis Ross (L) during their meeting in Gaza City yesterday. Arafat and Ross met to discuss issues related with the peace process.

— AFP photo

Trial of Nawaz Sharif Pilot testifies to have narrowly averted disaster

KARACHI, Feb 3: Barred from landing in Pakistan, and rapidly running out of fuel, a Pakistani pilot testified Thursday that he narrowly averted disaster last October when his routine flight became the focal point of the country's political feuding, reports AP.

The pilot, Syed Sarwat Hussein, detailed his nerve-wracking flight at the trial of ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has been charged with hijacking, attempted murder, kidnapping and terrorism. All the charges stem from the Oct. 12 flight, and Sharif could face the death penalty or life in prison if convicted.

Hussein was the captain of the Pakistan International Airlines plane that was carrying almost 200 people, including army chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf. On a journey from Colombo, Sri Lanka, to Karachi, Pakistan.

The plane had enough fuel to reach the airport in Nawabshah, also in southern Pakistan. But as the aircraft descended from about 30,000 feet to around 10,000 feet, the pilot was told that the Nawabshah airport was also off limits for Hussein's plane.

That created a very alarming situation because Nawabshah was available for other flights, but not to us, Hussein said. I reached the conclusion that it was because of the presence of the chief of army staff on board.

The situation then became even more disturbing when the air traffic control tower informed Hussein that he was not permitted to land at any airport in Pakistan, and should head to another country "at your own risk."

I advised the Karachi air traffic control that I had more than 190 souls on board and a limited amount of fuel, and if we were not allowed to land at the Karachi or Nawabshah air-

port, that would be the end of the story, Hussein said.

The pilot headed toward Nawabshah unaware that military officers in Karachi had learned of the drama and had taken over air traffic control tower from the civilians.

While flying toward Nawabshah, Hussein suddenly received new instructions from the Karachi tower to reverse course and return to Karachi.

This instruction created a state of confusion, Hussein added.

The pilot was then told to change radio frequencies, and was put in contact with army Gen. Iftikhar Ahmed, who confirmed the plane was now cleared to land in Karachi.

Hussein turned the plane around and touched down safely in Karachi at 7:47 pm, with only a few minutes worth of fuel remaining. The plane was immediately encircled by soldiers. Sharif, who was in the capital Islamabad, was overthrown and taken into custody by the army, and Musharraf took charge of the military government.

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