

Clinton kicks off S Asia tour

NEW DELHI, Mar 19 : Bill Clinton was heading towards India today for a six-day tour of South Asia, which marks the first visit by a US president to the unsettled region for more than two decades, reports AFP.

The president, daughter Chelsea, and his aides left Andrews Air Force base aboard Air Force One at 4:27 p.m. (3:27 am BST), a base spokeswoman told AFP.

India will command the lion's share of the president's tour, sandwiched between a one-day visit to Bangladesh and a stopover of several hours in Islamabad for talks with Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf.

The visit is eagerly awaited in India, which has not hosted a US president since Jimmy Carter in 1978 and wants to bring a new dynamism to a relationship that has suffered from more than 50 years of neglect.

"Obviously, what I hope to do

first is to rekindle the relationship between the US and India," Clinton said in Washington on Friday.

"We have a lot of things we can do together. A lot of mutual interests."

India and the United States will sign a political document laying a road map for future ties during Clinton's visit, a foreign ministry spokesman said Saturday.

"The statement, a political document, will set the direction for future Indo-US relations," he said.

But the mutual desire to see Indo-US ties launched on a new broad-based footing is tempered by deep differences over nuclear non-proliferation and US concerns over escalating military tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

The United States imposed a raft of sanctions on India after its May, 1998 underground nuclear tests, which triggered a tit-for-tat response from Pakistan.

Some have since been lifted and Washington has clearly linked withdrawal of the remainder to progress on non-proliferation and moves towards an easing of tensions with Pakistan.

"I want to do what I can to reduce tensions in the Indian subcontinent, to reduce the likelihood of weapons proliferation and the likelihood of conflict," Clinton said.

It is unlikely that Clinton's visit will see any concrete development on sanctions, with India stiffly resisting pressure to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and rejecting US offers to mediate in the dispute over Kashmir.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Saturday India would not sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) during the visit.

"We are not going to sign CTBT during Clinton's visit, but the issue will be discussed," Vajpayee told reporters.

Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Friday: "Our experience of any kind of third party facilitation, intervention or mediation in South Asia through historical precedents is not happy at all."

The Line of Control dividing Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir witnessed a bloody two-month conflict last year, and the current level of tensions is fuelling fears of a similar confrontation this summer.

In the run-up to the president's arrival, New Delhi has sought to shift the focus away from contentious issues and push the visit as the beginning of a fresh Indo-US relationship founded on strengthened economic ties.

"A new dawn and a new opportunity beckons for both of us and it is best that our two countries step forward together," said Singh, stressing India would not be overawed by the United States' superpower status.

"It is not as if the US is meeting India to confer upon India something or to give it something. The two big democracies are meeting as equals and are looking ahead," he said.

During his March 21-25 state trip, Clinton will visit the fotech showcase city of Hyderabad, as well as India's financial centre, Bombay.

Before that he will make a one-day visit to Bangladesh on Monday -- the first by a US president since the former East Pakistan won its independence in 1971.

The trip will end with a controversial stopover in Pakistan, which the administration has repeatedly insisted is in no way an endorsement of Musharraf's military rule there.

"I want to do what I can to support the restoration of democratic rule in Pakistan," Clinton said.

Pakistan pins Kashmir hopes on Clinton tour

ISLAMABAD, Mar 19 : Pakistan is pinning its hopes on US President Bill Clinton to help solve the explosive Kashmir issue as he starts a landmark trip to South Asia, reports AFP.

Clinton -- who tackled Pakistan onto his itinerary after weeks of uncertainty -- will stop off in Islamabad after visits to Bangladesh and India.

Clinton's description of Kashmir as "the most dangerous place in the world today" has raised hopes the United States may seek to push for a resolution of the issue.

Clinton has offered to broker a solution to the dispute, provided India and Pakistan both agree to mediation. While Pakistan is keen to internationalise the dispute, India is adamantly opposed to any

third-party interference.

Newly nuclear-armed rivals Pakistan and India have fought two of their three wars over the disputed Himalayan region since 1947 and came close to another full-blown conflict during fierce fighting last year.

"We earnestly hope President Clinton will launch a tangible initiative on Kashmir as he has recognized that peace hinges on a solution in Kashmir," said Sultan Mahmood Chaudhry, head of the government in Pakistani Kashmir.

"The Kashmir volcano will burst again if the dispute is allowed to drag on," Chaudhry told a news conference here Sunday.

Chaudhry said a European parliament resolution passed last Thursday which called for India and Pakistan to consider

UN mediation to end their stand-off represented a "diplomatic and moral victory for Kashmiris."

Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, in a statement from London, released by her party here, urged Clinton to focus on Kashmir.

Clinton "can use quiet diplomacy effectively to get peace moving. His visit offers hope to tens of thousands of Kashmiris living in the shadows of Indian control," Bhutto said.

Clinton last year helped defuse the Kargil conflict when then Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif withdrew Islamic fighters from occupied peaks in Indian Kashmir after a Washington meeting with the US leader.

Taiwan polls shows vitality of its democracy: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Mar 19 : President Bill Clinton hailed the election of pro-independence leader Chen Shui-bian as president of Taiwan, saying it highlighted the strength and vitality of the island's young democracy, reports AFP.

"I congratulate Mr. Chen Shui-bian on his victory," Clinton said in a statement released Saturday by the White House. "This election demonstrates clearly the strength and vitality of Taiwan's democracy."

"I believe the election provides a fresh opportunity for both sides to reach out and resolve their differences peacefully through dialogue," Clinton said.

Chen's victory was seen as a pointed snub at Beijing, which had waged a tense war of words against the island, clearly warning voters not to support the strong pro-independence candidate.

Former Chinese political prisoner Harry Wu, speaking from his home in California,

saluted the high voter turnout and the ascension of an opposition leader after more than 50 years of rule by the Nationalist Kuomintang party.

"We really have to applaud and feel very grateful," said Wu, who spent 19 years in Chinese prisons before emigrating to the United States in 1985.

"Zhu Rongji tried to make some impact and actually got the reverse," Wu said, referring to the Chinese premier's threats of military action if Taiwan dragged its feet on opening reunification talks.

The United States, which embraces a "one-China" policy, has said it will maintain that policy toward both Beijing and Taipei, while urging the rival governments to resolve their differences peacefully.

"The United States strongly supports ... dialogue, and is committed to promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the region," Clinton said, vowing to conduct "close unofficial ties with the people on Taiwan."

Experts see daunting task for Clinton in S Asia

WASHINGTON, Mar 19 : US President Bill Clinton said on Friday he hoped to ease tensions between India and Pakistan during his visit but security analysts said it will be a daunting task at best, reports Reuters.

The key issues facing Clinton during his one-week journey to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh will be trying to persuade Islamabad and New Delhi to rein in their nuclear programmes and to ease strains over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Kashmir has been the flashpoint for two of the three wars the countries have fought since they won independence from Britain in 1947, a history of conflict that has become more worrisome to the West since their May 1998 nuclear tests.

"I want to do what I can to reduce tensions on the Indian subcontinent, to reduce the likelihood of weapons proliferation and the likelihood of conflict," Clinton told reporters on Friday, a day before setting off for South Asia.

"I want to do what I can to support the restoration of democratic rule in Pakistan and to continue our cooperation with them against terrorism and in many other ways that we have both profited from over many decades," he added.

Blast kills 1 near Agra ahead of Clinton visit

NEW DELHI, Mar 19 : One person was killed and 16 injured in a bus bomb blast near the Taj Mahal city of Agra, four days ahead of US President Bill Clinton's visit there, domestic news agencies said, reports AFP.

The bus was on its way to New Delhi from the northern town of Aligarh when a bomb hidden under the seat went off, injuring four passengers seriously on Saturday at around 6:30 p.m. (7:00 pm BST), PTI said.

A.K. Jain, a senior police official in Agra said one person died of his injuries but said it was too early to link the blast to Clinton's impending visit to Agra.

The blast took place when the bus was passing a village around 20 kilometres (12.4 miles) from Agra. It occurred when a woman accidentally touched a blue bag, in which the bomb was concealed, with her foot.

Clinton was due to arrive in India late Sunday for a six-day tour of South Asia, marking the first visit by a US president to the region for more than two decades.

He will visit the Taj Mahal -- built by Moghul emperor Shah Jahan between 1631 and 1653 as a gesture of undying love for his second wife Mumtaz Mahal -- on March 22, the second day of his five-day state visit.



US President Bill Clinton waves from Marine One Saturday on the south lawn of the White House in Washington, DC. Clinton departs for a trip to India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, the first US president to travel to South Asia in over twenty years.

— AFP photo

Clinton to ask for nuclear restraint

WASHINGTON, Mar 19 : President Bill Clinton embarked Saturday on long-delayed journey to South Asia ready to caution India and Pakistan to curb their nuclear weapons competition, reports AP.

Clinton cancelled an expected formal departure statement. "Gotta Go," he shouted at well-wishers as he walked from the White House to Marine 1, the presidential helicopter, his arm draped around the shoulders of his daughter, Chelsea, and his mother-in-law, Dorothy Rodham.

The first lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton, passed up the trip because of her campaign for the US Senate in New York.

In discussing the trip with reporters Friday, Clinton said he will make clear to the governments of India and Pakistan "our view that a nuclear future is a dangerous future for them and for the world."

"We have a lot of things we can do together, a lot of mutual interests," Clinton said. "Obviously what I hope to do first is to rekindle the relationship between the United States and India."

The six-day trip marks the first presidential trip to India in 22 years and the first to Pakistan since 1969. Clinton also will be the first American president ever to visit Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest nations, the former eastern half of Pakistan, which gained independence in the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

Pakistan and India have given few if any indications they will heed Clinton's plea to step back from a nuclear-armed future and embrace nonproliferation. Both countries tested nuclear weapons in 1998. While both have said they plan no further tests, neither has moved to sign the international nuclear test-ban treaty.

The president's efforts to persuade the bickering subcontinental neighbours are handicapped by the Senate's vote last fall to reject US participation in the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

"I want to do what I can to reduce tensions on the Indian subcontinent, to reduce that likelihood of weapons proliferation and the likelihood of conflict," the president said Friday. "And I want to do what I

can to support the restoration of democratic rule in Pakistan and to continue our cooperation with them against terrorism."

Clinton also hopes to rekindle relations with India, the world's largest democracy, now that tensions generated by the Cold War with the former Soviet Union, India's friend, have cooled.

"We want to deepen ties between our governments, our private sectors, our scientists, our citizens," said Sandy Berger, Clinton's national security adviser.

In Pakistan, Clinton is expected to urge that deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif be spared execution if he is convicted on charges of hijacking, kidnapping and attempted murder.

Clinton also will deliver a live television address to press for a return to democratic rule in Pakistan after last year's military coup in which Sharif was deposed. And he is expected to raise US complaints about terrorism and tensions between Pakistan and India over the bitterly disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

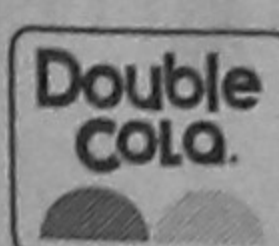
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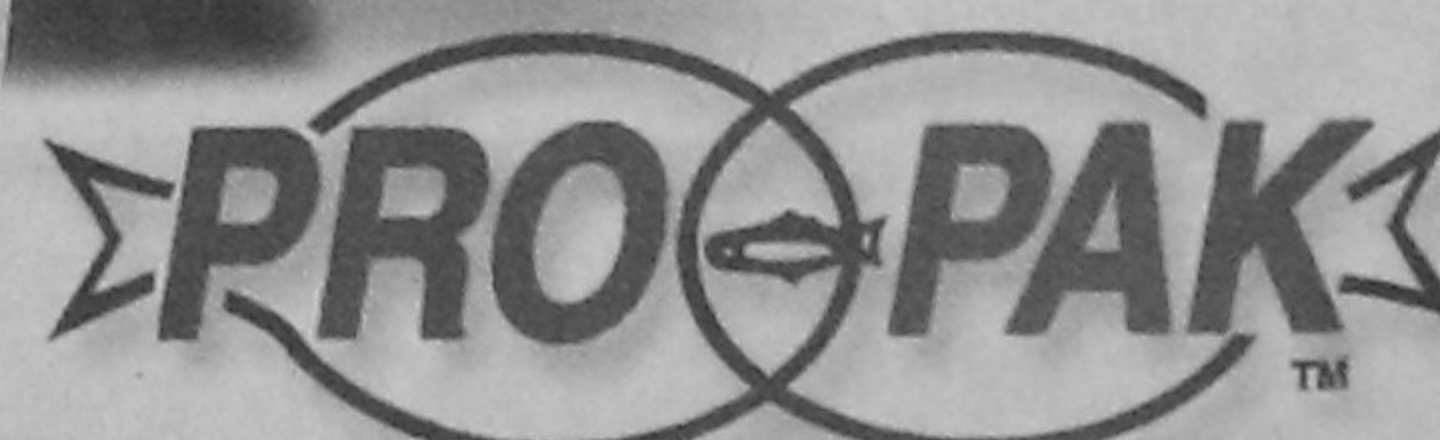
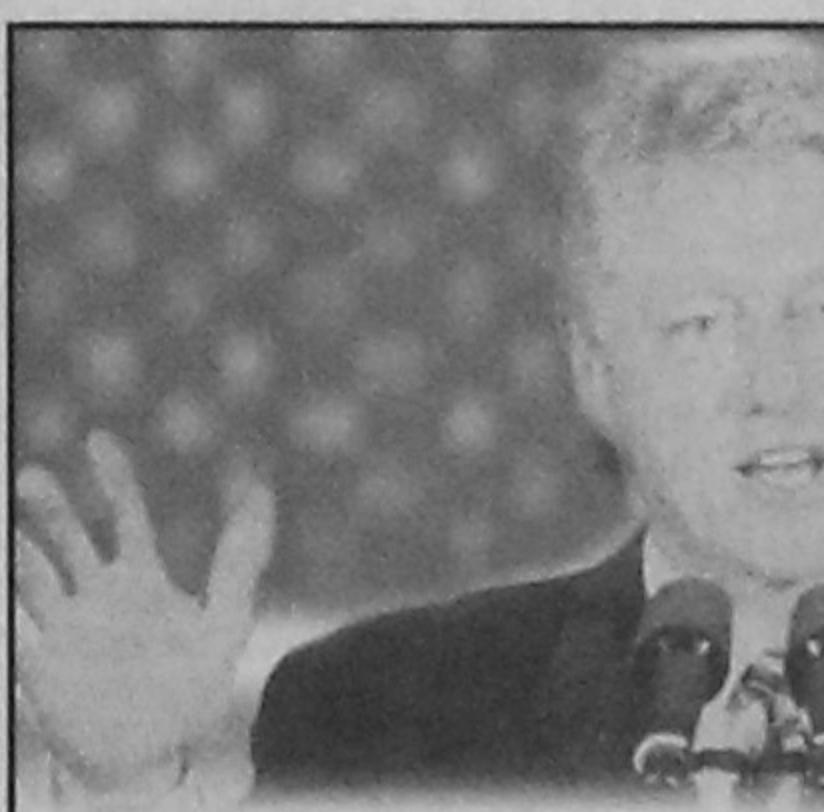
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