

Pakistan wants peaceful solution to Kashmir dispute: President

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23 : Pakistan wants a peaceful solution to its dispute with India over Kashmir but its armed forces are ready to thwart any aggression, President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar said here today, reports AFP.

"It is an issue of survival for Pakistan," the president said in an address as the country's armed forces put on a show of muscle at a National Day parade.

The parade was attended by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, top military commanders, high-ranking officials, diplomats and a crowd of thousands of spectators.

Pakistan's airforce staged a fly-past by 25 fighter jets, including US-built F-16s and French-built Mirages.

The crowd rose to their feet and applauded as the military brought on a selection of the country's missiles, from the short-range HATF-1, to the medium-range Ghauri and Shaheen II missiles.

Also on display were army tanks, mobile anti-aircraft guns, multi-barrel rocket launchers and mobile command and control centres.

The event commemorates the day in 1940 when Muslims formally called for the creation of Pakistan, which came into being seven years later with the partition of the sub-continent.

"We desire a peaceful settlement to the Kashmir issue," Tarar said.

Tarar said Pakistan, the world's first Islamic nuclear state, did not want an arms race in the region.

"But our armed forces are fully prepared to give a crushing blow to any aggressor," he said.

Both India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices in May 1998.

The Himalayan state of Kashmir, divided between Pak-

istan and India and claimed by both, has caused two of the three wars between the two newly nuclear-armed states since their independence in 1947.

Tensions between the two countries are running high, coinciding with the current South Asian tour of US President Bill Clinton, who is now in India and is due to visit Islamabad briefly on Saturday.

Clinton has urged India and Pakistan to lower the temperature and enter into a peace dialogue.

In an interview with the US news network ABC aired on Wednesday, Clinton said he believed there were "elements within the Pakistani government that have supported those who engaged in violence in Kashmir."

Tarar said he wanted to draw attention to "half a century of repression against the people of Kashmir" by India, which holds the southern two-thirds of the disputed state.

Among a procession of colourful civilian floats in the parade, one carried banners supporting the Kashmiri cause.

with slogans like: "Stop Indian state terrorism in Kashmir," and "UN grant right of self-determination to Kashmiris."

A Muslim separatist campaign in the Indian zone of Kashmir, which New Delhi blames on Islamabad, has claimed more than 25,000 lives since 1989 according to Indian reports. Pakistan puts the toll at around 70,000.

Islamabad denies giving military and financial support to the campaign but admits giving moral and political support.

Two Pakistani Army soldiers watch the medium range surface-to-surface Shaheen II missile passing by, during the country's National Day military parade in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan observed its 60th National Day in which President Rafiq Tarar said Pakistan wants a peaceful solution to its disputes with India over Kashmir but its armed forces are ready to thwart any aggression.

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Pipeline fire kills 50 in Nigeria

LAGOS, Mar 23 : A pipeline fire killed at least 50 people who were siphoning of gasoline, leaving the charred remains of men, women and children scattered around the pipeline along with the wreckage of motorbikes, shoes, clothing and fuel containers, state-run television reported.

It was not immediately clear what sparked the blaze early Wednesday in a remote part of Abia state in southeastern Nigeria.

Firefighters from the nearby cities of Umuahia and Aba rushed to the scene, but were unable to contain the flames, which raged on into the night.

Police arrested 28 people suspected of being vandals. Pipeline sabotage is common in this poverty-ridden West African nation, and vandals have triggered several explosions in the past.

5 ULFA militants, civilian killed

GUWAHATI, Mar 23 : Five ULFA militants, including a senior leader, and a civilian girl have been killed in an encounter between the extremists and army in lower Assam's Kamrup district yesterday, police sources said here, reports PTI.

The ULFA Saraghat unit Finance Secretary Amulya Patwari along with four other cadres were shot dead when they exchanged fire with the troops at Bomajagon, under Kamalpur police station, the sources added.

A civilian girl was killed in the cross-fire, police said.

Taiwan's Lee to quit KMT leadership

TAIPEI, Mar 23 : Lee Teng-hui is to quit as Kuomintang (KMT) leader Friday, finally caving into demands that he take responsibility for the party's humiliation in weekend elections, top officials said today.

"Chairman Lee is to resign Friday, and he will appoint vice-chairman Lien Chan as acting chairman," the director of vice-president Lien Chan's office Ting Yuan-chao told AFP.

The outgoing president's decision to go now instead of in September as he had planned was forced by five days of violent protests as well as mounting pressure from senior members of his own party.

Taiwan's stock market responded instantly to the news with a stunning rally, bouncing up as much as 4.9 percent to breach the crucial 9,500 resistance level on the main index.

"Buy orders are rushing in as investors take Lee's resignation as a sign of stability and a new beginning for the country," said Grand Cathay Securities Corp. analyst Chiang Min-chan.

'Cleansing' of Chechen village completed: Moscow

MOSCOW, Mar 23 : Russian forces on Wednesday completed the operation of "cleansing" Komsomolsky town, in southern Chechnya, where rebel troops had been putting up resistance, Russia's army chiefs in the region said, reports AFP.

Russian troops hoisted their flag in the area on Monday, but fighting had continued for several days, the Interfax news agency reported.

Television pictures showed the bodies of ten rebels dumped in a wood near the village which was completely destroyed.

The bodies of more than a hundred rebel fighters were left in the woodland, according to Russian army estimates.

In total, more than 700 fighters were killed during the battle for control of Komsomolsky which lasted several weeks, the Russian side said.

"Sense and sensitivity," was

the verdict of The Indian Express, while the Asian Age labelled the address "a diplomatic marvel."

"It was a rare spectacle as the world watched the senior representatives of the Indian people acting like moonstruck teenagers," The Age said in an editorial, while prescribing a strong dose of caution.

The language did not hide the harsh truth. And that was: there is no shift in US policy on non-proliferation. India-Pakistan relations and Kashmir."

Several newspapers said the real test of Clinton's rhetoric would come when he makes a brief stopover in Islamabad on Saturday for talks with Pakistan's military ruler General

Pervez Musharraf.

The Hindu newspaper said India had always abided by the key policies stressed by Clinton of showing restraint in its territorial dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, and respecting the Line of Control that divides the Himalayan region.

"The big question now is whether Mr. Clinton can get General Musharraf to accept them," the newspaper said.

"If the US is worried about a nuclear flashpoint in the sub-continent and wants the Indo-Pak peace process to resume, it is up to Mr. Clinton now to convince Pakistan to get off the dangerous course it has embarked on."

Clinton drew a melodic parallel between Indian classical music and Indo-US ties and said the two countries could write a symphony for greater than the sum of our individual notes, reports PTI.

Clinton said he had read that one of the unique qualities of the Indian classical music is its elasticity and melodic and rhythmic arrangements, but the player has improvised within that structure to bring the Raaga to life.

"Our relationship is like that. The composers of our past have given us a foundation of shared democratic ideals. It is up to us to give life to those ideals in this time," he said addressing members of both houses of parliament.

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US hints at lifting sanctions on India

Daley urges faster reforms

NEW DELHI, Mar 23 : US Commerce Secretary William Daley today hinted at the lifting of remaining sanctions against India as he urged New Delhi to accelerate and deepen economic reforms, reports AFP.

Daley, who accompanied US President Bill Clinton on his landmark five-day state visit here, told a joint business conference that he would "redouble efforts" to introduce US companies to the Indian market.

"Obviously, India's nuclear tests in May 1998 triggered economic sanctions that put all of this on hold. With President Bill Clinton's visit to India, we are optimistic that this hiatus is

coming to an end," Daley said.

The United States on Tuesday slightly eased sanctions imposed after India's nuclear tests to allow the resumption of a 25-million-dollar initiative to strengthen India's financial markets as well as funding for environmental protection.

The US has already partially lifted the sanctions, and India had been hoping that Clinton's visit would see the remainder withdrawn.

Daley said he was convinced of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's reformist credentials, but urged faster economic reforms.

The reforms launched by the

government have provided a stimulus to Indian businesses and created new foreign trade and investment opportunities, Daley said.

"But India has to continue its progress in implementing and carrying forward economic reforms and trade liberalisation. Further deregulation, giving the private sector a freer rein, will spur more growth," Daley said.

Clinton, who began his visit to India on Tuesday, said Wednesday that India was among the world's 10 fastest growing economies and forecast its economy would grow as much as 500 percent in the next 20 years.

Pak press concerned over Indian gains from Clinton visit

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23 : Pakistani newspapers today voiced concern over the implications of the new US-India relationship emerging during President Bill Clinton's visit despite continuing differences over nuclear issues, reports AFP.

"On more than one front and for more than one reason, the two have joined hands -- a union which its pitfalls and problems has a lot of promise

to grow stronger," The News said in an editorial.

The engagement will give New

Delhi's "clout at the Capital Hill more weight" and it will "strengthen its voice on critical issues like Kashmir, terrorism and Afghanistan," the influential daily said.

And that is Pakistan's challenge: dealing with an adversary that now stands next to the knee of a superpower," it added.

Another prominent daily, The Nation, said the "special treatment" being meted out to India by the US "is bound to cause considerable concern in Pakistan, which remained an American ally throughout the

Cold War."

It noted, however, that India-US talks "failed to lead to a convergence" of views on the question of non-proliferation and Clinton was "not taken in by the hollow assurances" of the Indian leadership.

There was also a divergence of views between India and US over Kashmir, the Himalayan state divided between Pakistan and India and claimed by both, it said.

Clinton is due to make a brief stop in Islamabad on Saturday at the end of his five-day official visit to India.

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BRIEFLY

One killed in Tajik-Afghan border:

A drug trafficker was killed and two Russian border guards wounded in a shootout at the Afghan-Tajik border overnight, the border guard reported yesterday, AFP says from Dushanbe.

The Russian guards were hit when they exchanged fire with four traffickers near the border. The border guard press release did not specify what happened to the other three men.

7 die in Spanish plane crash:

A Spanish Air Force reconnaissance plane crashed Wednesday night in bad weather and burst into flames, killing all seven people aboard, the Defense Ministry said, AP reports from Madrid.

The Spanish-built, twin-engine Aviocar plane went down in a rural area of Guadalajara province in central Spain. It had been flying from Moron de la Frontera in the southeast to Zaragoza in the northeast.

Pope celebrates mass at Last Supper Chapel

JERUSALEM, Mar 23 : Pope John Paul II attended a private mass today in the Jerusalem chapel said by Christian tradition to be the room where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper, reports AFP.

The Last Supper Chapel is located in a church on Mount Zion just outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City.

Following the private mass, Pope John Paul was scheduled to meet with Israel's chief rabbis before attending a ceremony at the Yad Vashem museum and memorial to victims of the Nazi Holocaust, considered the highlight of his visit to Israel.

Rabbis seek pope's apology

Meanwhile, Israel's leading rabbis called Thursday on Pope John Paul II to make an explicit apology for Vatican silence during the Holocaust ahead of his first visit to the memorial to the six million Jews slain by the Nazis.

"I hope that the pope will

mention the shoah (Holocaust) as a sin which requires an apology" from the Vatican, Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau said on army radio shortly before the pope was to tour the Yad Vashem memorial near here.

Elihu Bakshi-Doron, the leading rabbi for the Sephardim, or Spanish and Oriental Jews, also sought an apology.

"We're still living in the shadow of the shoah, especially with the rise of the extremist movement in Europe," Bakshi-Doron said.

"It's obvious that an important personality like the pope must ask for forgiveness, especially for the silence of the Church," he said.

But both Bakshi-Doron and Lau, who represents Jews of European origin, have welcomed the pope's general apology 10 days earlier in Rome for the historic sins of the Catholic Church against Jews and others.

Talk to Taliban over Bin Laden, Pakistan tells US

LONDON, Mar 23 : Washington should deal directly with the Afghan Taliban regime over suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden instead of pressing Pakistan to secure his handover, Islamabad's foreign minister said in an interview Thursday.

Abdus Sattar told the Financial Times here that it was down to the United States to negotiate with the Islamic militia ruling Afghanistan.

Bin Laden, a Saudi exile, is wanted by Washington for the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania

that killed 224 and injured hundreds more. He remains high on the US most wanted list.

He is hiding somewhere in Afghanistan under the wing of the Taliban, which has refused to hand him over to US authorities.

Sattar told the FT: "Pakistan would desire a solution of this problem, but ultimately the solution has to be worked out between the US and other countries which are concerned about this issue, and the government of Afghanistan."