

Congressmen ask Clinton Get closer to India than Pakistan

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: Two leading US Congressmen yesterday urged the Clinton administration to reassess its South Asia policy and get closer to India than to Pakistan in America's national interest, reports AP.

It was necessary for the US to get closer to India than Pakistan in the light of the widely disparate reactions from New Delhi and Islamabad to the issues raised by President Bill Clinton during his visit to the two countries, Congressman Frank Pallone said in a speech in the House of Representatives yesterday.

Pallone, co-founder and former co-chairman of the India caucus consisting of 117 members of the House of Representatives, had accompanied Clinton to India and Bangladesh.

He said the President's trip sends a message to our administration and state department about which South Asian nation can be relied upon to be an effective partner for the US in the years to come, namely India and which South Asian nation stands in direct opposition to America's interests and values, namely Pakistan.

Democratic Congressman Sherrod Brown, congratulating Clinton on his successful India tour, said it is in America's national interest to more fully engage India.

In a statement he said India has positioned itself to be one of the great success stories in the decades to come. India is the largest democracy and a pivotal player in the world today. We share common interest in promoting multicultural democracy and the rule of the law.



Japan's Ground Self Defence Force officers observe smoke billowing into the air as the Mount Usu volcano erupted yesterday after rumbling for days at Toya town in southern Hokkaido island, northern Japan. Some 13,500 people have already evacuated from the region. — AFP photo

Volcano erupts in Japan

DATE, Japan, Mar 31: The Mount Usu volcano erupted today after two decades of silence, spewing a rolling mixture of rock, gas and ash over the snowy countryside of Japan's northernmost main island, reports AP.

There were no reports of injuries or damage, but military helicopters and coast guard ships were mobilised to evacuate hundreds of people from several towns at the mountain's base.

Roughly 51,000 people live in this city and several smaller towns near Usu.

"It is possible that widespread damage could result from this eruption," chief Cabinet spokesman Mikio Aoki said from the government's emergency headquarters in Tokyo.

Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi was also at the headquarters monitoring the situation.

Volcanic ash began to rain down on several towns near the volcano shortly after the eruption. The area was also enveloped by the pungent, rotten smell of sulfur.

The plume and ash rose from the volcano amid generally clear skies. Within two hours of the eruption, the plume had risen to a height of 3,200 metres, according to the nearby Muroran Observatory.

Experts monitoring intense seismic activity over the past three days had predicted the eruption of 732-meter (2,416-foot) Mount Usu, which is located 770 kilometres north of Tokyo on the island of Hokkaido.

Days before the eruption, more than 11,000 residents from homes around its base.

Date city official Kazuki Owada said the city had widened its evacuation order to include another 548 people. All 13,000 residents in Abuta village were also told to evacuate their homes.

Police blocked entry all roads within a radius of 10 kilometres from the volcano.

Many townspeople rushed into the streets and onto rooftops to watch the eruption, which was clearly visible for several kilometres. Residents were calm, however, with most following directions to stay at evacuation centers or at their homes.

Mobile phone service was briefly cut off, but was quickly restored. Airline officials said some domestic flights to Hokkaido had been suspended, but that international flights were not delayed.

"We are asking people to keep indoors," said Tsutomu Kikuchi, a town official in nearby Toya village. He said he had no information yet on damage or injuries.

Kikuchi said the eruption was surprisingly quiet — and was not preceded by jolts. Most of the ash appeared to be wafting northeast over a nearby lake, and not over the more populous areas.

An hour after the eruption, ash from the plume had begun to fall on Toya, however.

The eruption began early Friday afternoon with a rapidly expanding plume of white smoke rising from the north-west rim of the volcano's crater.

India agrees to resume flights to Nepal

KATHMANDU, Mar 31: India has agreed to resume Indian Airlines (IA) flights to Nepal from as early as next week, an official said here today, reports AFP.

"The IA has to make arrangements for the resumption of the services from India to Nepal," the secretary of the civil aviation and tourism ministry Barun Kumar Shrestha told AFP.

"It may take a few days, but I believe the services should start within the next week," Shrestha said.

The agreement follows four days of talks between Nepalese and Indian civil aviation officials.

The airline suspended its daily services between India and Nepal following the hijacking by Pakistani Islamic militants of an IA plane flying from Kathmandu to New Delhi Christmas eve.

The bilateral talks addressed Indian concerns about security arrangements at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan international airport to avert any future hijacking of IA aircraft.

The Nepalese officials assured their Indian counterparts that security arrangements would be made in accordance with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) regulations.

"India has, however, proposed to allow the IA staff to check the baggage and the passengers of the flights bound for India," Shrestha said.

"If the passengers are checked as per the international air service prevailing norms and practices, we should not have any objection to it."

The discussions were led by the Indian civil aviation senior joint secretary, Sunil Arora, and the Nepalese civil aviation and tourism joint secretary (technical) Hari Bhatka Shrestha.

Taiwan vulnerable to attack: Pentagon

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: Taiwan is vulnerable to attack from China because after years of isolation its military lacks training, the Washington Post said today quoting a secret Pentagon report, says AFP.

The highly confidential report points to "a host of problems" with the Taiwanese military's ability to defend the island against fighters, ballistic and cruise missiles, a US official familiar with the document told the daily.

"There is no other military in the world that experiences the kind of isolation Taiwan's does," the official said.

"They don't train or have contacts with anyone. And as warfare has become more complex, it has become more difficult for them to handle all these new technologies."

The report comes at a time of heightened tension between China and Taiwan following the election of a pro-independence president in Taiwan.

It also raises doubts about the US government's proposed sale of advanced military gear to Taiwan, including four sophisticated Aegis destroyers and long-range radar. China has warned that it would consider the sale a hostile act.

Taiwan's military have sat out the information revolution and so have fallen several generations behind in information processing, the official's version of the report said.

A defence expert agrees with the report, saying that the Aegis destroyers would not help the Taiwanese military deal with "their core military problem of island-air defence."

"What their situation demands," said Michael Swaine, a military specialist at the Rand Corporation, "is a lot of software integration, especially linkages between their army, navy and air force."

The report was ordered by the Pentagon's policy office and is the first in a series of studies of the military balance between China and Taiwan, the daily said.

A Pentagon official involved in producing the report said it "was an extraordinarily difficult process, because it is such an extremely sensitive issue."

The administration of President Bill Clinton is expected to make a decision on whether to go forward with the military sales to Taiwan by the end of April, when a Taiwanese delegation is scheduled to arrive here, the Post said.

China asks US not to interfere in its internal affairs

BEIJING, Mar 31: China has told the United States not to interfere in its internal affairs and stop arming Taiwan with sophisticated weaponry even as it continued to oppose Taipei's independence, reports PTI.

This unequivocal message was conveyed by the Chinese leadership during meetings with US national security adviser, Samuel Berger here Wednesday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Sun Yuzi told reporters here at a briefing.

"We have our principles in developing China-US relations, namely, to strictly abide by the three Sino-US joint communiqués, and the basic norms of interference in each other's internal affairs," Chinese premier Zhu Rongji said.

During their meeting Zhu emphasised that no matter who is in power in Taiwan, he should not be up to Taiwan independence and any form of Taiwan independence is not allowed.

Jilted husband kills 37 in China

BEIJING, Mar 31: A jilted husband took revenge on society by detonating a home-made bomb at a wedding in his village in northern China, killing himself and 36 wedding guests, state media reported today, says AFP.

Liu Zhanjin, a former explosives expert in a coal mine, turned up at the wedding in the main street of Shajian village wheeling a bomb weighing around 50 kilograms (120 pounds) on a cart, said the China Youth Daily.

The blast ripped through the assembled guests, blasting a huge crater in the middle of the road, and killing himself and 24 people on the spot. Twelve other people died from their injuries and 30 others were injured.

After his wife deserted him a year ago and took his precious son, 34-year-old Liu told his friends in a jealous rage that he would bring about an "even worse disaster."

However, his wife and three children — the son and two daughters — were apparently not at the wedding in the village in Shanxi province and it was unclear why he chose to attack his neighbours.

The carnage happened on Wednesday morning as more than 100 villagers gathered for the special occasion.

Explosives are frequently used in China's countryside for building and farming work and circulate amongst the population in an almost anarchic fashion, leading to frequent misuse and tragedies.

But the wedding massacre was the worst of its kind reported in the official press in the past 10 years.

BRIEFLY

25 die in road mishap in India: At least 25 people were killed and 42 injured yesterday when a speeding truck rammied into a parked lorry in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, the Press Trust of India reported. AFP says from New Delhi.

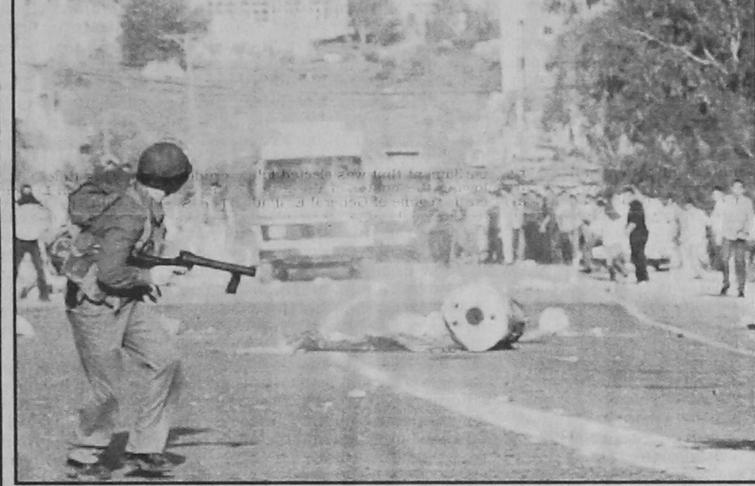
Police said the accident occurred near the town of Mangoli in Karnataka's Bijapur district. They said the dead included eight women and 10 children. Officials said the victims were worshippers headed for a religious shrine.

365 tigers found in W Bengal: The number of tigers in West Bengal had marginally gone up to 365 in the last census conducted in the state in 1999, Minister for Forest JC Burman yesterday announced in the assembly, PTI reports from Calcutta.

In the previous census the number of tigers in the state was 361, he informed the house. The minister said according to last year's census, the number of tigers spotted in the Sunderbans was 254.

Myanmar student leader held: Thai police arrested a leading member of an exiled Myanmar students' group just before he boarded a plane for the United States, dissidents and officials said Friday. AFP reports from Bangkok.

Mother Zun is being held in prison in Bangkok following his arrest last weekend in the departure lounge of the city's international airport, police said. "He was charged with using a fake Myanmar passport, a fake Thai visa stamp, and illegal entry," an immigration police official said.



Israeli police clash with Arab demonstrators in the northern Arab Israeli town of Sakhnin in the Galilee on Thursday. Thousands of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs demonstrated on the annual Land Day, which marks the killing of six Israeli-Arabs by Israeli soldiers in a series of protests in 1976 over the confiscation of land from Arab communities in northern Israel. In Sakhnin, the home town of three of those who died in 1976, 18 people were injured. —AFP photo

Air pollution reduces rainfall: Study

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: Urban and industrial air pollution reduces rainfall in temperate regions, according to a new study that says it is an indication of how human activity is influencing global rainfall patterns, reports PTI.

Using satellite observations, Daniel Rosenfeld from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has shown that rainfall decreased substantially downwind of a pollution source.

The result indicates that human activity may be altering clouds and natural precipitation on a global scale, Rosenfeld reported in the journal 'Science'.

Rain occurs when cloud droplets coalesce into larger drops or when snow particles are formed in the upper portion of the clouds. About a million droplets must stick together to make a precipitation-sized drop.

Rosenfeld said pollution caused by aerosol particles (tiny particles suspended in atmosphere and a major component of air pollution) suppressed rainfall by inhibiting the coalescence of cloud droplets and by preventing the formation of ice particles in the cloud.

No change in US policy towards Libya

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: The US State Department said Thursday it had not changed its policy towards Libya despite Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi saying he would welcome an end to the two countries' 20-year diplomatic split, reports AFP.

"There is no change in US policy," said US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker. "We are focused in getting Libya to meet the outstanding requirements of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions."

Washington was still waiting, he said, for full compliance from Libya with UN Security Council resolutions in the wake of the 1988 Pan Am air disaster over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 270 people died.

A possible lifting of the ban on travel to Libya "does not represent any change in the US government position on the bombing or the need for full Libyan compliance with UN Security Council resolutions," Rubin said.

The United States is looking for Tripoli's "cooperation with the trial, end to support for terrorism, acknowledgment of responsibility for actions of Libyan officials, payment of appropriate compensations," said Reeker.

During an interview on the London-based satellite channel Arab News Network (ANN) Thursday, Kadhafi said: "We would favourably welcome renewed relations with America, which unilaterally decided in the past to break ties."

Relations between the United States and Libya were broken in May 1981 after Libya's ambassador to Washington was expelled.

The United States is now considering lifting a ban on travel to Libya, in force since 1981. A US consular mission was sent to Tripoli last weekend to see if it was safe for Americans to visit the North African country.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Tuesday she may be inclined to lift the ban if the safety assessment team urged it, while drawing a sharp distinction between that and any moves toward restoring diplomatic relations with Libya.

Curing epilepsy: New sciences offer hope

BETHESDA, Mar 31: Newly emerging sciences that involve mapping all the human genes and using powerful "master cells" known as stem cells may finally offer hope of a cure for epilepsy, researchers said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

They told a meeting of epilepsy experts that new drugs that target specific genes, or even using gene therapy to change how genes in the brain work, are now within the reach of doctors.

"The science has arrived to where we can do something about it," Dr Gerald Fischbach, director of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), which sponsored the conference, titled "Curing Epilepsy," told reporters.

He said scientists finally were starting to understand which genes were involved in seizures, what they look like and how to design drugs to act on them.

Epilepsy affects an estimated 1 per cent of the population globally. It can be caused by faulty genes, by a blow to the head or a stroke, by a brain infection or by a tumour.

Symptoms range from the classic "grand mal" seizure in which a patient falls, convulsing to the ground, to a barely discernible complex partial seizure, which seems to consist of little more than a temporary dreamlike state.

Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite and established the Nobel prizes, had epilepsy, as did the Russian novelist Dostoevsky.

Fischbach said about 50 genes had been identified that have an involvement in epilepsy. Just this week in the journal Nature Genetics, a team of University of Michigan scientists reported a mutated form of a gene called SCN1A, was linked with epilepsy in two French families.

Understanding the genetics can help doctors target therapies for individuals and their unique forms of epilepsy, Fischbach said.

This is important because, although there are two dozen drugs for epilepsy on the market, they all have drawbacks. "There isn't a single drug on the market that doesn't have serious side-effects," Fischbach said.

And doctors have identified hundreds of different epilepsy syndromes, all caused by slightly different factors.

Current drugs can affect the entire brain, but epilepsy is usually caused by a problem in a very specific and limited region, researchers told the conference.

'Clinton's visit to India helps save endangered tigers'

NEW DELHI, Mar 31: US President Bill Clinton's sighting of two wild tigers during his recent trip to India and his appeals to save the endangered animal will greatly help conservation efforts, a leading animal rights activist said today.

Belinda Wright, executive director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India who accompanied Clinton and his daughter Chelsea to a tiger reserve in western India, told AFP the US president had been dismayed over the threat to the tiger.

"It was a strong message from arguably the world's most powerful man who before coming to India specifically said I want to see the Taj Mahal and I want to see the Indian tiger."

Wright, a British national based in India, said Clinton, his mother-in-law Dorothy Rodham and Chelsea were "blown over" when they spotted two Royal Bengal tigers while visiting the Ranthambhore National Park on March 23.

"He clearly left Ranthambhore with tigers on his mind because he talked about their plight twice when he addressed big businessmen's conferences the next day," she said.

Clinton had said in a business speech: "I hope all of you will help to preserve your tiger population. It's an important part of India's heritage."

Developing a theme that there should be a "higher purpose" than just business success and wealth, he said that there was "a need to protect our planet and those who share it with us."

He said he had seen two "magnificent tigers" at Ranthambhore and had learned, much to his "dismay", that already this year "20 tigers have been killed in India, even though it is not legal to do so."

The government estimates there are about 3,750 tigers remaining in India. Conservationists believe there were about 40,000 at the start of the last century.

The worldwide tiger population is estimated at between 5,000 and 7,500, down from 8,500 in the early 1990s and 100,000 a century ago.

Wright said her organisation had "bombed the White House with tiger statistics" before the visit, adding that during his talks with her, Clinton had asked officials to "write to him in detail about the problem."

Israeli border police kills Palestinian

JERUSALEM, Mar 31: Israeli border guards shot and killed a Palestinian at the entrance to a West Bank town when the car he was riding in tried to speed through a road block, police sources said today, reports AFP.

They said police had been called to the West Bank village of Anata late Thursday after what turned out to be a false report that there were four armed men holed up in a house.

While they were on the scene a car carrying several Palestinians attempted to charge through a nearby barricade in the road. Border guards opened fire and the wounded man was taken to a Jerusalem hospital, where he later died.

Minor incident hits Ukraine N-plant

KIEV, Mar 31: A reactor in the Rivne nuclear plant in western Ukraine was disconnected from the electricity grid Thursday following a minor incident in its turbine system, a spokesman for the plant told AFP.

The plant's third reactor continued to operate at three per cent capacity, enough to meet its own power needs, after it was disconnected from the network at 0030 GMT (0630 BST) when steam began escaping from the turbine system's piping.

"No increase in radioactivity was detected," spokeswoman Viktoriya Leonova said, adding that the reactor would be reconnected to the power grid on Friday.

Kiev is to add a fourth reactor to the Rivne plant in a bid to compensate for the proposed closure of the infamous Chernobyl plant at the end of this year.

Meanwhile in Germany, the Frankfurter Rundschau newspaper in its Friday edition was to report that the Chernobyl plant's last working reactor was far more dangerous than was previously thought.

Quoting a report by Ukrainian nuclear experts, the daily said the security concerns were over the nuclear material being used and the graphite coating surrounding it.

The intensity of neutrons inside the reactor is leading to an abnormal increase in the uranium rods, which could lead to a serious nuclear accident if the problem worsens, the newspaper said.

Chernobyl was the scene of the world's worst civilian nuclear accident in 1986 and is still perceived as a safety risk for Europe.

US increasing forces in Kosovo, Macedonia

WASHINGTON, Mar 31: The United States said on Thursday it was sending extra reconnaissance troops to Kosovo and tanks to Macedonia after rising tensions following the activity of ethnic Albanian guerrillas in southern Serbia, reports Reuters.

Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon said 125 special US reconnaissance troops were being sent from Germany to help patrol the border between Kosovo and the Presevo valley in Serbia, where NATO commanders fear a possible resurgence of fighting between Albanians and Serbs.

He also said 14 tanks and six artillery pieces were being sent to a US armored company in Skopje, Macedonia, partly to serve as a deterrent along the border with Serbia.

City dwellers will outnumber rural residents by 2007

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 31: The world's urban population is growing so fast that by the year 2007 city dwellers will outnumber rural residents for the first time in history, the UN Population Division says, reports IPS.

And in 40 years — at current growth rates — the world urban population will double, to about 5.5 billion. There are now 6 billion people on the globe.

Currently 2.9 billion people or 47 per cent of the world's population live in urban areas. By 2030, when total global population is expected to hit 8 billion, some 4.9 billion people or close to 60 per cent of all the people in the world will be city dwellers, according to the 1999 Revision of the UN Official.

The world has experienced remarkable demographic change during the second half of the 20th century, but the pace of change has not been uniform across countries," UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said in a report to the Commission on Population and Development, which began its 33rd annual session Monday.

A report prepared by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) states that, "Globally, only in Asia there were consistent increases in levels of urbanisation over the last four decades."

Interestingly, the majority of projected population increases are expected to be absorbed by the urban areas of less developed regions.

These regions will account for 98 per cent of global population growth between 1999 and 2015, according to Charting the Progress of Populations, a publication of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The DESA report also emphasises that stabilisation of population growth has been found to make a crucial contribution to the achievement of sustainable development.

In East and South-East Asia, populations have slowly begun to stabilise, according to the ESCAP report. However, South and West Asian populations are rapidly increasing as well as experiencing large rural to urban shifts. The ESCAP study also found that urbanisation in the Asia and Pacific region includes a significant proportion of females.

Government policies that have promoted export-led development, free-trade zones, and a labour environment free of industrial activity have boosted the number of female workers and consequently, there are high numbers of very young unmarried girls living alone, away from their families and traditional support structures.

One of the themes the Commission on Population and Development is exploring during its current session is the link between population, gender and development.

Joseph Chamie, director of the UN Population Division, told IPS that demographics have a pivotal impact on all components of society, "economic, social, political and cultural."

"Virtually all population growth from now until 2030 will be concentrated in the world's urban centers," the UN Population Division report notes.

The urban populations of less developed regions are expected to rise from 1.9 billion in 2000 to 3.9 billion in 2030. In contrast, their rural population will grow very slowly, at just 0.1 per cent. World rural population will remain nearly stable, varying between 3.2 and 3.3 billion.

The urbanisation process is expected to be most rapid in Asia and Africa. Consequently by 2030, more than 50 per cent of these regions' inhabitants will be city dwellers.

By 2030, the urban population of Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean will reach approximately 83 per cent.

The report estimates that 28.5 per cent of the world population currently resides in small cities of less than 1 million inhabitants.

The report emphasises that "large urban agglomerations do not necessarily experience fast population growth some of the fastest growing cities have small populations and, as population size increases, the growth rate of a city's population tends to decline."

Tokyo is the largest urban agglomeration in the world, with 28.4 million inhabitants, and will remain the largest although its population will not grow, the report says.