

Japanese PM keen to ease strained ties with India

NEW DELHI, Aug 23 : Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori today voiced his strong desire to improve bilateral ties with India -- strained since New Delhi's 1998-nuclear tests, reports AFP.

"I would like to make India-Japan relations much better than they are now," Mori said after a welcoming ceremony to mark the start of the official leg of his three-day India visit.

Following the welcome at the presidential palace, Mori -- the first Japanese premier to visit India in 10 years -- held talks with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and was scheduled to meet Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee later in the day.

While the talks are sure to include the sticky issue of nuclear non-proliferation and Japanese sanctions, both sides

have made it clear that they want to move bilateral relations forward, especially in the economic sphere.

That desire was underlined by Mori's decision to kick off his visit Tuesday in the southern city of Bangalore, India's infotech capital, where the prime minister toured some flagship software firms and unveiled a series of initiatives to enhance IT cooperation.

Tokyo, which was India's largest aid donor, responded to the 1998 nuclear tests by freezing developmental assistance and halting fresh yen loans. The same sanctions were imposed on Pakistan, which followed India's tests with underground blasts of its own.

Japan has cited the signing of the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as a prerequisite for lifting the sanc-

tions against both countries.

Mori's efforts to push India over the CTBT are unlikely to bear any fruit, with Indian leaders expected to reiterate that a decision on signing the treaty will only be made once a national consensus has been formed.

Despite the differences, some observers predict the search for a broader relationship will result in the launch of a security dialogue.

Earlier, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori today began the official leg of his three-day visit to India.

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Russians mourn for Kursk crew as bereaved families grill Putin

Radiation levels normal in Barents Sea

VIDYAEVO, Russia, Aug 23 : As Russia observed a day of national mourning for the lost Kursk submarine crew, President Vladimir Putin abruptly returned to Moscow today after facing a grilling from bereaved relatives in which several women fainted, reports AFP.

The under-fire president had earlier been expected to attend a memorial service on the Barents Sea at the site where Russia's most modern nuclear submarine and its 118-man crew went down under mysterious circumstances on August 12.

Putin's failure to quickly accept Western aide in the rescue mission has come under intense scrutiny, and the new Kremlin chief flew to this Arctic port late Tuesday to explain to grieving families that all had been done to attempt to save the crew.

Rescuers abandoned their mission on Monday but some relatives still refuse to give up a glimmer of hope -- if only because none of the bodies have yet been recovered from the Arctic waters.

"We are unable to accept that everyone is dead when not even a single body has been brought up," said Tatjana Baibarina, whose son Roman was aboard the Kursk.

"We are against holding the memorial ceremony," added Tatjana Nikitina, mother of sailor Igor Fedorichev. "Until the bodies have been raised, we think they are alive."

Access to the overnight meeting between Putin and relatives was tightly restricted.

Russian television showed only brief footage of Putin -- dressed all in black and looking subdued -- facing questions from visibly upset family members.

However, witnesses said several women lost consciousness and had to be carried out of the packed auditorium as they vented their frustration with Russia's ineffective rescue bid.

NTV television reported that the hostile treatment Putin received and possible future security concerns forced the president to change his plans and return to Moscow.

The Northern Fleet later an-

nounced that the Barents Sea ceremony had been cancelled entirely on the relatives' request.

The relatives, during their meeting with Putin, asked to cancel all of the planned ceremonies, said Northern Fleet spokesman Igor Babenko. "They have been cancelled."

Yet a national day of mourning was still observed across the country as flags flew at half mast on state buildings, including Putin's Kremlin residence.

Earlier, radiation levels are normal at the site of a sunken Russian nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea, the Norwegian Radiation Protection Authority said Wednesday.

"We have had a team there working together with the Norwegian divers, and they have taken samples both inside and outside the sub. None of these shows any leakage from the nuclear reactors," spokesman Per Strand told AFP.

"These indicate that the reactors were shut down properly," he added.

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