

The World

Next step for India is to open dialogue, says Pakistan

Pak troops along Kashmiri border pulled back, Clinton hails peace overtures, militants vow to fight on

ISLAMABAD, Dec 21 : Pakistan today welcomed "positive" signals from the Indian leadership on Kashmir but said they fell short of a clear response to Islamabad's call for meaningful dialogue, reports AFP.

Foreign Office spokesman Riaz Mohammad Khan said Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's statement in the parliament on Wednesday announcing an extension of New Delhi's ceasefire in Kashmir had a "positive tone."

"Yet it falls short of a clear response to Pakistan's initiatives that may justify optimism for an early start of a meaningful negotiating process on the Kashmir issue," he said.

Pakistan on December 2 ordered its troops to exercise "maximum restraint" along the Line of Control (LoC), the unofficial border between the Indian and Pakistani zones of the divided Himalayan state.

On Wednesday it announced a partial withdrawal of troops deployed on the tense LoC on the heels of the one-month ceasefire extension by Vajpayee, who also promised "exploratory steps" towards resuming a dialogue with Pakistan.

"For nearly three weeks there have been conditional statements emanating from New Delhi which show a certain reluctance to seize the opportunity which has been opened by Pakistan's initiatives," Khan said.

"India needs to make up its mind on a meaningful dialogue process."

Another report says, Pakistan on Wednesday announced a partial troop withdrawal along the tense unofficial border in divided Kashmir following India's extension of its ceasefire with Muslim militants, reports AFP.

The military's public relations department also called on India to appreciate the move by reducing its troop presence in its part of the Himalayan state.

Pakistan has unilaterally taken another bold initiative to withdraw part of its forces deployed along the Line of Control (the unofficial bor-

der)," the military said in a statement.

The move back has already commenced and the troops have started moving towards cantonments (barracks).

The action manifests Pakistan's earnest and genuine desire to de-escalate the situation in order to facilitate the process of meaningful dialogue on the issue.

"It is hoped that India would also reciprocate in a similar manner and de-induct part of its 700,000-strong force deployed in Indian-occupied Kashmir."

But Kashmir's main militant group, the Hizbul Mujahideen, dismissed India's ceasefire extension as "drama" aimed at deceiving the world.

India should recognise Kashmir as a disputed territory, drastically cut its heavy troop deployment, release rebel prisoners and agree to three-way talks with Pakistan and the Kashmiris, Hashmi said.

Another report from Washington says, US President Bill Clinton Wednesday praised Pakistan's partial troop withdrawal along the conflicted unofficial border in divided Kashmir and India's extension of its month-long ceasefire there.

"This initiative (to prolong the ceasefire), along with Pakistan's announcement today ... raises the hopes of the world community that peace is possible in Kashmir," the outgoing US leader said in a statement.

Earlier, hardline Muslim militant groups today rejected India's extended ceasefire in divided Kashmir and vowed to continue their armed struggle.

"It is a political gimmick and the Mujahideen have nothing to do with it," Haratul Mujahideen chief Moulana Farooq Kashmiri said.

He said the Mujahideen would stop their bloody separatist insurgency only when the last Indian soldier left Kashmir, not on the basis of mere announcements."

Turkish prison assault fails to end hunger strike amid protests

ANKARA, Dec 21 : A massive assault aimed at suppressing a widespread hunger strike by prison inmates appears to have failed, with Europe-wide protests signalling authorities here may have also paid a heavy diplomatic cost, reports AFP.

Armed resistance has continued in two jails, while detainees forcibly removed from others refused medical aid, with the official toll from the "rescue operation" in 18 Turkish jails put at 19 lives.

Although the Turkish government has declared the operation a success, saying that 187 hunger strikers had been hospitalised and were receiving treatment, the full picture is less clear.

A non-governmental medical organisation told AFP that all the prisoners the government claims to have rescued were refusing medical aid.



Miss World 2000, Priyanka Chopra (C), greets Indian President K. R. Narayanan (R) as Miss Asia-Pacific Diya Mirza (L) looks on yesterday at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi. Chopra and Mirza took their respective titles in London and Manila earlier in the month. -AFP photo

Nagaland militants send Christmas peace message

GUWAHATI, India, Dec 21 : One faction of a divided tribal Christian guerrilla group in India's strife-torn northeastern state of Nagaland made a Christmas appeal for peace and unity today, reports AFP.

"We want to forgive and forget the past and usher in a new era of hope and peace where there is no more bloodshed and rivalry among fellow Nagas," said Kitovi Zimomi, self-styled prime minister of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

"Let us all realise the importance of unity and vow on the eve of Christmas and New Year to stop the rivalries."

Zimomi belongs to the NSCN faction led by S.S. Khaplang, which has been involved in a bitter internecine struggle with a rival faction led by Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah. Both factions are spearheading

UN staff hopeful of quick return to Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, Dec 21 : UN aid workers are hoping for a quick return to Afghanistan after withdrawing ahead of new sanctions imposed this week, but the political wing's future there remains in doubt, officials said today, reports AFP.

We want a meaningful dialogue with the Indian government and to succeed in our mission it is pertinent that all the Nagas unite and fight under one umbrella by settling any differences that may have arisen".

The Indian government and the Isak-Muivah faction of the NSCN entered into a ceasefire in August 1997, which has been followed by several rounds of peace talks.

The Khaplang faction announced a unilateral ceasefire earlier this year, although the federal government was yet to formally lay down ground rules for the truce.

"We're hopeful that the situation remains stable in Afghanistan and we can go back to the work that we're committed to," a

UN relief official said.

Some 60 foreign UN staff pulled out of Afghanistan before the sanctions, leaving their relief operations in the hands of local workers.

On the political side things were less optimistic following the Taliban's vow to "retaliate" if its overseas representative offices are closed, as required under the latest sanctions.

Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel said the

UN's reclusive leader, Mulla Mohammad Omar, condemned the sanctions but asked people to avoid public demonstrations like those which saw UN offices ransacked after the first round of sanctions were imposed last year.

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