

International

India disappointed by Pak response to Kashmir ceasefire: Fernandes

BOMBAY, Jan 20 : India's outspoken Defence Minister George Fernandes today said New Delhi was disappointed by Pakistan's response to a ceasefire announced by it in disputed Kashmir, reports AFP.

The defence minister also insisted the Indian government will not offer any time-frame for deciding on a planned trip to Pakistan by Kashmiri separatist leaders, which is currently on hold.

"One is disappointed at the way the Pakistani leadership is looking at it (ceasefire)," Fernandes told reporters after opening a naval housing complex in this western coastal city.

"Until the otherday they (the Pakistani leadership) were talking about Jihad and their commitment to provide training and other aid to militant outfits in Kashmir.

"Today, Pakistan seems unwilling to rein in those (separatist groups) it had earlier let loose."

Fernandes said India had hoped that its unilateral suspension of military action against the anti-Indian rebels would get the two South Asian rivals to the negotiating table.

"The ceasefire is holding completely and totally as far as the Line of Control (in Kashmir) is concerned. Troops on both sides of the border are staring down at each other.

"In so far as the situation in Kashmir is concerned, there hasn't been any great let up in the activities of some of the militant outfits such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahideen and others," Fernandes said.

Most pro-Pakistan guerrilla forces have rejected the Indian ceasefire, warning that they will instead intensify raids in Kashmir.

Fernandes's comments came two days after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said the ball was in Pakistan's court to create a cordial atmosphere leading up to peace talks between the two sides.

Vajpayee said Islamabad's support to cross-border militancy, especially in Kashmir, were major impediments to peace, adding that a spurt in violence in Kashmir, following the ceasefire from November-end, was Islamabad's handiwork.

A 53-year-old row over Kash-

mir has caused two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their independence from British colonial rule in 1947.

An ongoing separatist campaign in Indian Kashmir has left more than 34,000 people dead over the past 12 years.

India blames Pakistan for fomenting the Muslim insurgency, and has linked talks with Pakistan to a halt in what it calls cross-border "terrorism."

Islamabad, which holds the northern third of Kashmir, denies the allegations but provides moral and diplomatic support to the separatists.

In Bombay, defence minister Fernandes also said any extension to the ceasefire, set to end January 26, would depend on how Islamabad responded to Vajpayee's demand that it rein in the militant groups that have been "trained, equipped, financed and pushed into our country."

Fernandes, speaking of the planned trip by Kashmiri separatist leaders of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference to Pakistan, said the event was under the consideration of the government.



Ousted Philippine president Joseph "Erap" Estrada waves to supporters from a ferry yesterday in Manila after leaving Malacanang Palace to cross the Pasig River to Malacanang Park. Estrada vacated the presidential palace with his family after his desperate bid to cling on to power collapsed and his Vice President Gloria Arroyo was installed in power. --AFP photo

Bush urged to salvage ME peace

GAZA, Jan 20 : The Palestinian leadership has called for US President-elect George Bush to push through a "real relaunch of the peace process" in the Middle East after he takes office today, reports AFP.

"We call on the new US president, George W Bush, for a real relaunch of the peace process on the basis of UN resolutions ... and on the basis of the peace principles set out at the (1991) Madrid treaty stipulating the exchange of land for peace," the leadership said in a statement issued Friday.

After its weekly meeting in Gaza the leadership said it hoped to establish "solid relations with

the new US administration, in the interest of the United States."

The statement went on to praise the regional efforts of outgoing President Bill Clinton.

"We are still in favour of continuing talks, the Palestinian people have chosen the path of peace through peaceful negotiations, because the deadlock in talks cannot help peace, or regional security," the Palestinians added.

Meanwhile, peace prospects hung in the balance Friday, with Israel delaying its response to a Palestinian proposal for 10 days of intensive negotiations in Taba, Egypt.

The delay followed the discovery of a murdered 16-year-old Israeli's body in the West Bank Thursday.

On the security front, Israel bolstered its ties with the United States, signing an agreement that will increase military assistance by 60 million dollars per year. The aid will reach 2.4 billion dollars per year by 2008.

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