

India planning to reduce troops in Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

India is planning to prune its security forces in Kashmir, to help nudge forward a nascent peace process in the restive Himalayan state, newspaper reports said Thursday.

The Hindustan Times and The Hindu cited "highly placed" security officials as saying the army would reduce a sizeable number of its "additional troops and heavy equipment" moved to Kashmir following a bitter border conflict in the Kargil region in 1999.

The process will be staggered over the next three months and will be implemented in such a way as not to compromise New Delhi's security concerns in the region, the reports said.

A defence ministry spokesman declined to comment on the reports, saying only that he had no details of the proposed reduction.

A senior army official said the reports referred to a long-term process being implemented in Kashmir.

"Pockets of Kashmir cleared of (Muslim) militants have been

handed over to the paramilitary forces and the state police by the army ... it's been happening for the past four years now," the official said.

"For instance, the security of Srinagar is now in the hands of paramilitary forces ... the army only operates in areas where their assistance is requested," he added.

These reports come just weeks after speculation in sections of the Indian media that India was planning to withdraw the army from Kashmir in phases over the next five years.

Defence Minister George Fernandes has denied any such move.

There were differing opinions among the strategic community here about the proposed pruning of forces.

According to one former Indian foreign secretary, who declined to be identified, the proposal is just a "trial balloon ... I do not think India will go through with it."

However another analyst, retired Major General Ashok Mehta, said India had increased the number of

its artillery units (155mm Bofors howitzers) from two to 12 in the region after the Kargil conflict.

"These units are likely to be decreased to create a better balance in the area ... the combat units (infantry) will not be decreased but the combat support units could be decreased."

The current peace moves in Kashmir were launched when New Delhi suspended military operations against militant groups in the state in November last year.

The unilateral ceasefire has since been twice extended and will expire on February 26.

Pakistan responded by saying it would exercise "maximum restraint" and pull back troops along the disputed Indo-Pakistan Kashmiri border.

The 53-year-old row over Kashmir has caused two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

More than 34,000 people have died in the past 12 years in the ongoing separatist campaign in the Indian-administered part of the Muslim-majority state.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian student protesters shout and gesture in front of the Parliament complex in Jakarta yesterday during a protest against President Abdurrahman Wahid. Thousands of demonstrators gathered outside Parliament as most members of parliament accepted a damaging report that could lead to moves for impeaching embattled President Abdurrahman Wahid.

'Intifada must continue alongside peace talks'

Sharon vows to keep unified Jerusalem, Golan Heights under Israeli rule

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement and five other factions vowed Thursday to continue their uprising as a "strategic option" alongside peace talks with Israel.

"After 10 years of fruitless negotiations with Israel, the Intifada is a strategic option for the Palestinian people with the aim of reaching national liberation and a viable independent state," the groups said in a statement issued at a meeting in east Jerusalem ahead of the February 6 Israeli election for prime minister.

The groups declared the importance of continuing the Intifada or uprising, that has so far claimed the lives of almost 400 people, but said they "have no objection to the principle of negotiation."

However, they demanded peace talks continue without the sponsorship of the United States, which they accused of favouring Israel.

Besides Fatah, the meeting included the Damascus-based Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which has opposed the current peace process.

Palestinian officials have warned the election of hardliner Ariel Sharon, who has a commanding lead over Prime Minister Barak in opinion polls, would be a disaster for the peace process.

Meanwhile, Israel's right-wing prime ministerial front-runner Ariel Sharon told a Spanish newspaper he would keep Jerusalem "united under Israeli rule in any agreement" with the Palestinians, in an interview published Thursday.

Sharon, who is leading in the polls ahead of next Tuesday's elections, also told El Mundo that he had ruled out any Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967.

Listing his conditions for peace in the Middle East, Sharon said: "First of all, Israel must maintain its sovereignty over the whole city of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount."

Secondly, he said, was the proviso that "the Jordan Valley, including the Dead Sea, constitutes Israel's eastern security zone."

"Thirdly, there will be no return of Palestinian refugees to Israeli territory" he added, insisting fourthly that "Israel will not withdraw from the Golan Heights under the terms of a peace agreement with Syria."

Lastly, Sharon said he was opposed to a plan to give the Palestinians an area of Israel's Negev desert in compensation for Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

Such a move, he said, would "put the territory into the hands of armed Palestinian forces which would turn 15 of our villages into front line posts."

Sharon said, "I'm aware that to achieve peace we have to make painful sacrifices," without spelling out what those might be.

But the prime-ministerial race-leader said that he would not allow such sacrifices to undermine "the rights of Jews to live safely in their own land."

"Israel has recognised the Arabs' rights to self-determination. It is time that they recognise Israel's right to the same" Sharon said.

Preparations for clean-up begin as hopes dim for quake survivors

AFP, Bachao

Yellow bulldozers and huge piles of firewood for mass cremations sit poised outside this quake-devastated Indian town to clear away the rubble and dispose of bodies now that the search for survivors is all but over.

The smoke from isolated funeral pyres wafts into the sky from several spots in the debris-cluttered and eerily quiet streets of Bachao, a town of 50,000 in Gujarat state which was one of the worst-hit by the January 26 quake.

But the biggest funerals are expected when the bulldozers and heavy cranes move in and begin smashing through the tons of concrete, brick and stone from col-

lapsed houses and buildings clogging the streets.

Officials and residents estimate that thousands of residents of this town of salt merchants and traditional handicraft artisans remain entombed, six days after the powerful quake rocked Gujarat's drought-gripped Kutch region.

"No one knows exactly how many bodies are still trapped," said Ashok Bhai, a rescue worker who was trying to account for the 90 members of a Bachao home for the blind.

The overall death toll from the quake, India's worst in five decades, has been placed at potentially more than 100,000.

Bhai and other relief workers said it would take weeks to clear

away the rubble in Bachao and months, if not years, to repair the damage to the town's infrastructure.

"I think in the end they will have to burn down certain parts of the city," said Sukhbhai Patel, a medical assistant in a private clinic set up to help injured victims.

Fears are growing that unless the buried corpses are dealt with quickly, their decomposition will contaminate water supplies and trigger an epidemic.

Before the quake, one of the major attractions of Bachao was a Mughal fort situated strategically on a hilltop overlooking the town of predominantly green-and-white whitewashed houses.

The stone walls of the fort stood for centuries but they could not

withstand the force of the 7.9-degree quake and came crashing down.

From atop the jumbled stones of the fort walls, there is a panoramic view of the town below allowing observers to digest the full extent of the devastation.

Aside from the bleating of a goat trapped in a courtyard, there is little sound on the ghostly streets and virtually no movement.

Everywhere there are piles and piles of rubble. Some homes have collapsed neatly into compact knee-high mounds while others have scattered debris out into the streets.

Buildings which did not collapse tilt crazily. Of several houses, only the green wooden doors remain standing upright.

Mars Surveyor to stay on the job one more year: NASA

AFP, Washington

The Mars Global Surveyor, which concluded its primary mission on Wednesday, will stay aloft one more year to continue its observations of the red planet, the US space agency NASA said.

"By any conceivable measure the scientific impact of the Mars Global Surveyor has been extraordinary," project scientist Arden Albee said in a statement issued by the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, California.

"In many ways we now know Mars to be a different planet than when the spacecraft arrived in 1997, and our perspective continues to evolve as the data keep flowing," he said.

US, Britain stand firm on sanctions against Libya

AFP, Washington

The United States and Britain on Wednesday welcomed the conviction of a Libyan for the 1988 Lockerbie bombing that killed 270 people, but stood firm in demanding Tripoli accept responsibility and compensate the victims' families before UN sanctions are lifted.

"I want to assure the families and victims, the United States government will continue to pressure Libya to accept responsibility for this act and to compensate the families," said President George W. Bush.

"We expect Libyan authorities to take full responsibility for the action of their official," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said through a spokesman after the verdict from a Scottish court sitting in the

Netherlands.

The court convicted one of two Libyans charged with planting the suitcase bomb which brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie killing all 259 people aboard -- including 189 Americans -- and 11 on the ground.

The three-judge court, wrapping up an 84-day trial, found Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, 48, guilty of bombing and sentenced him to life in a Scottish prison with no possibility of parole for 20 years, to be deported "if and when he is released."

The second Libyan accused, Al Amin Khalifa Fhimah, 44, was acquitted.

"Nothing can change the suffering and loss of this terrible act. But I hope the families do find some

solace that a guilty verdict was rendered," said Bush, confronting the first major international development of his 11-day presidency.

A spokesman said the British leader was "glad justice has been done," but emphasised: "We also expect them (Libya) to pay compensation as awarded by the courts, and this and other requirements are laid down in the United Nations Security Council resolutions and are obligatory on Libya."

He said an amount of 700 million dollars had been set by the US courts.

In a statement released shortly after the verdict, the White House praised the decision as "a victory" for international justice but insisted that the conviction "does not in itself" spell an end to UN sanctions.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (2nd R) meets with Secretary of Interior Gail Norton (L), Secretary of State Colin Powell (2nd L), Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld (R), Vice President Richard Cheney (front L) and the rest of his Cabinet in the Cabinet room at the White House for the first time on Wednesday.

Bush urges his Cabinet to keep high ethical standard

AP, Washington

President George W. Bush convened his first Cabinet meeting, instructing hand-picked officials to keep "the highest of ethical standards" and lowest of budgets. He revealed himself to be jokey but firm with those who might cross him.

With Secretary of State Colin Powell at his right elbow and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at his left at Wednesday's meeting, Bush gathered his team around the massive Cabinet table to remind them, he said, "that a dollar spent is somebody's money and that we expect there to be lean budgets."

And, the president said, "I expect only one standard, and that's the highest of ethical standards." In what could be taken as a poke at the Clinton administration, which saw some Cabinet members resign under criminal investigation, Bush told reporters: "I want to assure Americans that they're going to be as proud of this Cabinet as I am."

There were conspicuous absences in the crowded Cabinet room, where aides in assigned seats lined the walls.

Bush's attorney general pick, John Ashcroft, whose nomination was being hotly debated on the Senate floor as the Cabinet met, and would-be trade representative

Robert Zoellick have not yet won Senate confirmation.

Tommy Thompson, confirmed by the Senate but not yet sworn in as health and human services secretary, was home in Wisconsin delivering its state of the state address, his swan song as governor. He'll resign that job Thursday.

The Cabinet meeting, called to order precisely on schedule ("I expect my Cabinet officials to be on time," Bush said), sat smack in the middle of a day of presidential outreach to House and Senate tax committee members, Catholic leaders and wary black lawmakers.

Some who emerged from those closed-door meetings painted a portrait of Bush eager to form personal bonds with the people he'll need to get his legislative agenda enacted. Others, like Rep. Charlie Rangel of New York, who chuckled about outreach overload after the second of his three White House visits in two days, said Bush put Democrats on notice that bipartisan cooperation must be a two-way street.

The president "made it clear if we weren't positive, he didn't have to be positive either," Rangel said after a morning meeting on tax-cut options. "He made it clear that he's the president and he would have the last word. He was smiling when he said it."

Russia urges Pakistan to pacify Taliban

AFP, Moscow

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov urged Islamabad to use its influence in Afghanistan to pacify the ruling Taliban militia there.

"Russia expressed the hope that Islamabad would use its influence on the Taliban to change their approach to regulation in the country," the foreign ministry said in a statement after Losyukov held talks

with Pakistan's ambassador to Moscow Wednesday. The foreign ministry stressed that the hard-line Taliban should "reject the use of force in resolving problems and to cease actions that lead to undermining stability and safety in the region."

Losyukov told Pakistani Ambassador Iftikhar Mursheed that a political solution to the Afghan problem would only be found when a coalition government was formed that would represent all ethnic sectors of Afghan society.

French, German leaders hold patch-up summit

AFP, Strasbourg

The leaders of France and Germany met for talks over private dinner late Wednesday and promised to patch up the differences in their historic partnership provoked by the European Union's impending enlargement to the east.

President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin of France held three hours of discussions with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder at a restaurant outside Strasbourg in the border region of Alsace -- a venue specially chosen to emphasise the impor-

ance of the two nations' post-war reconciliation.

Also attending the dinner were foreign ministers Hubert Vedrine and Joschka Fischer.

The talks were arranged after tensions between the two countries burst to the surface at last month's European summit at Nice, and their leaders agreed on the urgent need to "re-define" the link which has been the driving force behind the EU for the last 40 years.

Emerging from dinner in an atmosphere of bonhomie, Chirac said it had been "pleasant, important and useful... We have decided to build together a policy of deepening Europe."



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac (L) and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder share a toast at their meeting in the village of Blaesheim near Strasbourg on Wednesday. The leaders of France and Germany met for talks over a private dinner Wednesday in an effort to ease the painful strain in their historic partnership provoked by the European Union's impending enlargement to the east.

Pinochet arrested

AFP, Bucaram

Chile's former dictator Augusto Pinochet was placed under house arrest on Wednesday at his country home here ahead of a possible trial on murder and kidnapping charges.

The ailing, 85-year-old Pinochet, who ruled Chile with an iron fist from 1973 to 1990, was ordered detained and officially informed of murder

and kidnapping charges against him stemming from a 1973 military campaign to wipe out opposition to his rule. The arrest warrant was delivered to Pinochet in person by Rayen Duran, a clerk working for investigating judge Juan Guzman, accompanied by a police escort, at the ex-dictator's seaside Los Boldos residence, 120 km southwest of Santiago.

Forex crisis pushing Lanka to Norway's peace move

AFP, Colombo

A major economic crisis may encourage Sri Lanka to break an impasse in the Norwegian-backed peace process and enter talks with Tamil Tiger separatists, diplomatic sources here said Thursday.

Peace hopes were also raised when Norway's Erik Solheim arrived here Wednesday on his latest mission to try to bring Colombo and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table.

Solheim met with Sri Lanka's main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and was expected to hold talks with other key leaders, including President Chandrika

Kumaratunga. Diplomatic sources noted Solheim's latest mission was taking place against the backdrop of Kumaratunga's remarks that there were "small, but positive" signals from the Tamil Tigers to enter a dialogue.

"The economic picture must be a compelling reason for the government to move to the negotiating table," a diplomatic source said.

"The Tigers too are having serious problems of manpower. That should encourage them too to talk."

Central Bank deputy governor, W. A. Wijewardena said Sri Lanka was facing the danger of not being able to secure its imports due to its poor foreign reserves.

3 explosions rock Kabul

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan capital was shaken by three explosions near key ministries Thursday but no loss of life or major damage was reported, residents and officials said.

Two blasts occurred before sunrise near the education and foreign ministries while a third rocked the disused Kabul Hotel about 100 meters (330 feet) from the foreign ministry at around 11:30 am (13:00 BST).

Officials with the ruling Taliban militia instantly blamed saboteurs from the opposition alliance headed by ousted defence minister Ahmad Shah Masood.

Putin visits Yeltsin

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Boris Yeltsin in hospital Thursday to congratulate the former Kremlin chief on his 70th birthday, the Kremlin said.

"The president is there (at Moscow's Central Clinical Hospital) right now," a Kremlin spokesman said by telephone.