

Indian FM rules out N-cooperation with Israel

XINHUA, Cairo

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh here on Saturday ruled out the possibility of conducting any nuclear cooperation between India and Israel, the state-run Middle East News Agency reported.

Speaking to the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, Singh termed the claim that the two countries have carried on such cooperations as "absolutely untrue," adding that his country embarked on developing its own nuclear capabilities in 1956 without any help from any other country.

"Although India has not signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, it has been abiding by the UN rules with regard to nuclear tests," said Singh, adding that the "nuclear power" India possesses is used for deterrence.

Singh arrived in Cairo last Thursday for a four-day visit.

Lanka postpones local polls

XINHUA, Colombo

Local government elections in war-torn Sri Lanka which is scheduled to be held in March this year have been postponed by one year, The Island newspaper reported on Sunday.

The paper quoted Provincial Councils and Local Government Minister Nandimitra Ekanayake as saying on Saturday that the elections were postponed in view of the demand for reforms including the reintroduction of the previous first past the post system, under which the candidate who get the largest number of votes from an electorate is considered the winner in the election.

2500-yr old coins, human skeleton found in Nepal

XINHUA, Kathmandu

About 2,500-year old coins, earthen wares, a complete human skeleton and a wall of a house were found in the course of excavations being carried out at Ramgram Stupa of Navalparasi district in southwestern Nepal where the relics of Lord Buddha have been preserved, Nepali state media said yesterday.

The skeleton is believed to be that of a disciple of Lord Buddha, but nothing can be said definitely about it before a laboratory test, the official RSS news agency quoted sources from the Lumbini Development Trust as saying.

The Nepali Archaeology Department has been carrying out excavation work at the site near Lumbini where Lord Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was born some 3,000 years ago, RSS said.

10 die as bus, truck collide in Pakistan

AP, Karachi

A passenger bus collided with a truck in southern Sindh province on Sunday, killing at least 10 people and injuring 11 others, police said.

The accident occurred when the bus was attempting to overtake another vehicle near Khairpur, 320 kilometers (192 miles) north of the port city of Karachi.

The dead included two children. The injured were rushed to a nearby hospital, police said.

Reuters bureau chief in Tehran expelled

AFP, Tehran

The Tehran bureau chief of the British news agency Reuters and his wife, a correspondent for several Western newspapers, have been expelled from Iran, Iranian journalists said Sunday.

Jonathan Lyons, a US national, "left Iran on Friday night on official orders," the Iranian journalists said.

His wife, Genevieve Abdo, who is the correspondent for The Guardian in London and the International Herald Tribune, left with him.

The couple had been strongly criticised by Iranian officials for sending written questions in a bid to interview to jailed reformist journalist Akbar Ganji early last month.

Ganji was recently sentenced to 10 years in prison and a further five in internal exile for, among other things, having accused top government officials of ordering the killings of leading dissidents.

Real estate developers blamed for Gujarat quake deaths

AP, Ahmedabad

When they churned out dreams for Gujarat's middle class, India's real estate czars were king: they drove in swank cars, lived in posh penthouses, and made fortunes.

Now many of them are in hiding, pursued by accusations of murder and fraud after their lofty and allegedly flimsy buildings turned into rubble in western India's Jan 26 earthquake.

By Sunday, complaints against 21 construction companies had been lodged with police in Ahmedabad, Gujarat state's commercial capital.

"The real estate sector is the largest cesspool of corruption in India, because it involves the largest cost," said architect Ravindra Vasavada, a historical preservation expert and member of several government architectural committees.

The full magnitude of the disaster in Gujarat has yet to be measured. Assessments of the death toll by state officials range from 11,844 to 16,403. State authorities have estimated the toll could eventually hit 35,000.

The number of confirmed dead was expected to jump on Monday, when demolition crews clear away the ruins of larger apartment blocks and uncover more bodies. The injured numbered 66,758, Gujarat state officials said.

Health worries in the quake zone are mounting. There are more than 600,000 homeless who lack food, clothing or sanitation, and respiratory infections are spreading. The quake severely affected 35 million in 1,016 villages and eight towns. The total population of the region is 45 million.

Relief workers are rushing to keep pace. Aid has been flowing into the quake area from around the world. On Saturday, US Air Force C-17 cargo planes brought tents, blankets, water tankers and forklifts.

In the aftermath of the quake, scrutiny has turned to the real estate kings

who have transformed Ahmedabad from a merchant city into a throbbing metropolis.

Criminal complaints were lodged against them and many apartment dwellers wanted to assault them, saying poorly constructed buildings had increased the death toll.

Experts said greedy construction companies used inferior material, flouted architectural norms and fed into a cycle of corruption and inefficiency that also involved bureaucrats and elected officials.

Gujarat Home Minister Haren Pandya estimated that 80 per cent of the buildings in Ahmedabad were poorly constructed.

"This is the dream of all concerned with earthquake safety to see that the buildings are protected as far as possible. But this is not happening," said S K Srivastav, president of the Indian Meteorological Society.

The story of Ahmedabad is the story of nearly every booming city in India.

In a nation of 1 billion people, the population explosion has reduced the floor space available to each urban family. As millions more rush into the urban areas from smaller towns, land prices have soared.

To meet the booming demand, some builders reclaim land from the sea and village ponds, snuffing out crucial water resources. They bribe officials to overlook poor workmanship or code violations. Builders do not need licences to start up business in India, and quality checks are rare.

For instance, a survey by engineers after the earthquake showed that pillars were not secured to foundations with steel reinforcements, as required. Sinking the pillars alone into the concrete saved up to 25 per cent on costs and made the buildings much weaker.

When the earthquake struck, many such buildings several less than six months old swayed and collapsed under their own weight. Walls made of adulterated cement buckled. Many buildings tilted to one side and crumbled.

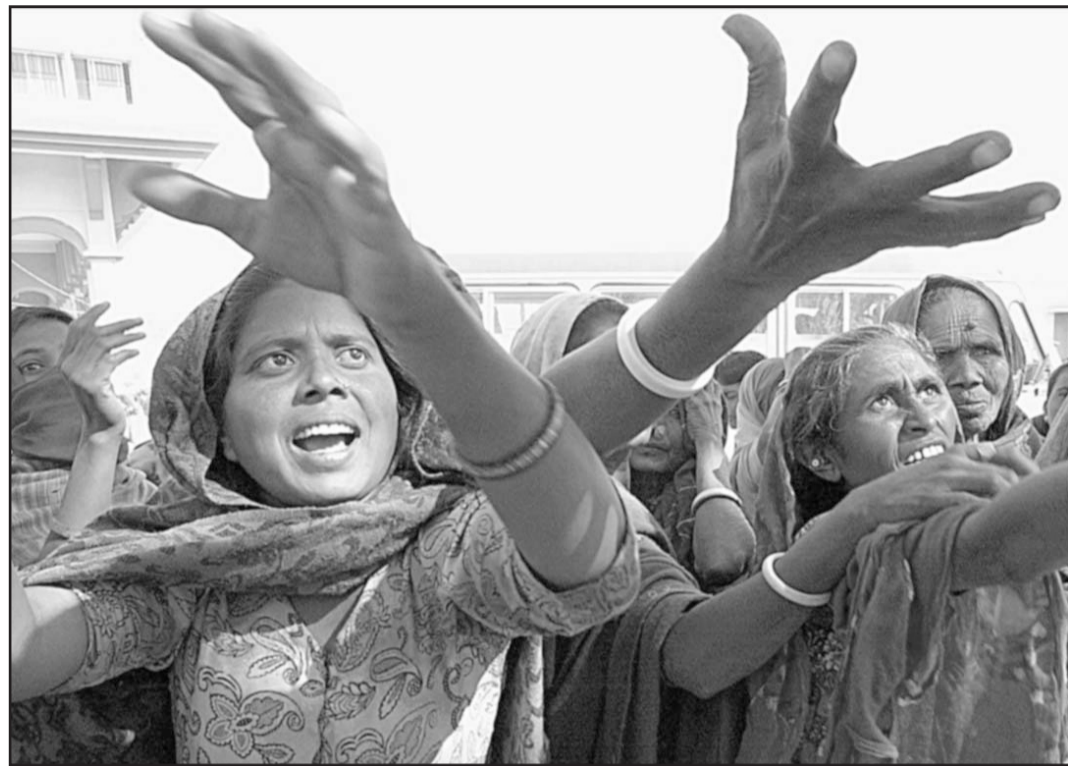


PHOTO: AFP

Indian earthquake victims try to reach for food distributed by a relief team yesterday in Anjar village of India's western state of Gujarat which was devastated by the quake that measured 7.9 on the Richter scale last week.

India needs Japanese quake know-how: Vajpayee

AFP, Tokyo

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee hopes to gather information about Japan's earthquake-resistant construction following the devastating tremor in his country, press reports said Sunday.

"We would like to learn many things from Japan as far as earthquakes are concerned," Vajpayee told Japanese reporters in New Delhi on Saturday as he announced the cancellation of a scheduled week-long trip to Malaysia and

Japan.

"I wanted to make use of my visit to seek cooperation in this field," he was quoted as saying at his official residence by Kyodo news agency.

He particularly cited Japanese methods of building quake-resistant housing.

The tour, which would have started on Wednesday, was called off so Vajpayee could concentrate on relief work after the January 26 quake in western Gujarat state that killed at least 30,000 people and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

"I am disappointed that the visit has been postponed," Vajpayee said, adding that he now hoped to visit Tokyo later this year.

Japan, located on the so-called volcanic "Ring of Fire" along the Pacific Rim, is prone to major earthquakes and has developed advanced techniques in the field of quake-resistant construction.

A five-member Japanese medical team with experience of treating victims of the 1995 Kobe earthquake, which claimed 6,424 lives, has also been helping in Gujarat.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga addresses the nation yesterday as the country marks its 53rd anniversary of independence from Britain. Kumaratunga marked the occasion by announcing that the government was ready to enter Norwegian-backed peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels in a bid to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.

Colombo ready for talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga Sunday announced her government was prepared to enter Norwegian-backed talks aimed at ending decades of bloodshed following positive signals from Tamil rebels.

Kumaratunga said in an address to the nation on the 53rd anniversary of independence from Britain there was a "somewhat favourable response" from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to peace talks.

Kumaratunga's statement came hours after Norway's peace envoy, Erik Solheim, left here after fresh attempts to break the impasse in his attempts to broker talks between the Sri Lankan antagonists.

"We must see how we can make use of the window of opportunity," Kumaratunga said in her televised speech after receiving a 21-gun salute at a tightly-guarded ceremony outside the national parliament building here.

"We never closed the door for peace talks with the LTTE... the talks will not be to establish Eelam

or to divide the country," the president said, referring to the LTTE's demand for a separate state called Eelam.

She did not, however, indicate when or where the talks could take place. Diplomatic sources said the first round was likely in Oslo "fairly soon."

Kumaratunga also flatly rejected agreeing to a ceasefire before talks commence as demanded by the LTTE through the Norwegian facilitator Solheim.

The issue had deadlocked efforts to broker talks to resolve the conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives in the past two decades.

The LTTE has observed a unilateral truce since December 24 and has urged the international community to pressure Sri Lanka to reciprocate.

Kumaratunga, who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, said security forces had recovered from setbacks suffered at the hands of the Tigers last year and were advancing to take more territory from the rebels.

Quake survivor found in well after 8 days

REUTERS, Bachchau

A seventeen-year-old boy had a miraculous escape from India's devastating earthquake, surviving for eight days in a village well into which he had fallen, witnesses said yesterday.

The youth, Arjun Bhai, was found on Saturday by neighbours and pulled out unscathed in the village of Sikaravadi, 13 km (eight miles) from Bachchau, the boy's neighbour, Usha Ben, said.

"We discovered he was in there when he started throwing stones," she said.

"He thought it (the earthquake) was a bomb and ran into a shed by the well and the shed fell into the well," she said.

Some 30,000 people are estimated to have died in the earthquake in India's western state of Gujarat on January 26.

'US will not act alone on missile defence system'

REUTERS, Munich

New US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld promised Europeans on Saturday that Washington would not act alone on plans for a controversial national missile shield and would help its allies deploy such defences.

"The United States has no interest in deploying defences that would separate us from our friends and allies," he told the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy.

"Let me be clear to our friends in Europe: we will consult with you," Rumsfeld said. He also met privately with the defence ministers of France, Britain, Germany and Italy.

The first top official of the new government of President George W Bush to visit Europe and address the touchy issue, Rumsfeld reiterated that the United States did intend to build a national missile defence (NMD) against limited attack from such states as North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

"A system of defence need not

be perfect. But the American people must not be left completely defenceless," Rumsfeld said.

"The United States intends to develop and deploy a missile defence designed to defend our people and forces against a limited ballistic missile attack, and is prepared to assist friends and allies threatened by missile attack to deploy such defences."

He gave no timetable for such a defensive system. Two of the last three tests have failed, and critics say such a scheme would cost in excess of 60 billion dollar.

In an interview with reporters travelling with him, Rumsfeld also attacked support for the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty which prohibits national missile defences as "Cold War thinking."

Despite bitter opposition from Russia and China to the NMD plan, Rumsfeld said, it "just doesn't threaten anyone."

Several European leaders say the ABM treaty, which Rumsfeld in December called "ancient history,"

is a bedrock of nuclear arms control and are worried Washington will abandon it.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder reiterated his strong reservations about NMD to the conference, urging that Washington and its allies "look for joint answers to the existing and new threats to security" within the current arms control framework.

German Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping also stressed during a meeting with Rumsfeld that missile defence had to be discussed in the context of the full 19-member NATO alliance, according to a senior Pentagon official.

Rumsfeld told reporters that Moscow, which has rebuffed US efforts to amend the ABM treaty, was lobbying in Western Europe and around the world to kill the US scheme.

He declined to say whether he felt the ABM treaty should be modified, or scrapped.

Palestinians call for 'day of rage' to mark Israeli election

AFP, Jerusalem

The spectre of Israeli-Palestinian violence loomed large Sunday just two days before the Israeli leadership election, with further bloodshed in the occupied territories and calls for a "day of rage" on polling day.

A coalition of Palestinian groups known as the National and Islamic Forces called for mass demonstrations Tuesday, the day Israel goes to the polls to choose a new prime minister in a race pitting incumbent Ehud Barak against his right-wing rival Ariel Sharon who is streaking ahead in the polls.

On the ground, the Israeli army said an armed Palestinian was killed by a military patrol while trying to infiltrate into Israel from the Gaza Strip, bringing to 395 the number of people killed during the four-month spiral of bloodletting in the region.

The Israeli army on Friday reimposed a blockade on most of the West Bank, and the Haaretz newspaper reported that the military planned to beef up its presence in the territory in an attempt to counter a recent spate of drive-by shootings.

Deadly violence has jumped markedly over the past week, with casualties among both Israelis and Palestinians further damaging Barak's faint hopes of re-election.

Barak was on Sunday holding his final cabinet meeting ahead of the election, when Israel's 4.1 million registered voters will for the first time choose a prime minister without parallel elections for parliament.

And Sharon, who opinion polls show winning by a margin of around 20

percentage points, scored another boost to his campaign for the nation's top job on Sunday, with an endorsement from the ultra-Orthodox Jewish lobby.

The United Torah Judaism party, with five seats in parliament, offered a qualified endorsement of Sharon in an announcement published in ultra-Orthodox Jewish newspapers, although it did not mention the Likud leader by name.

"You must vote for the candidate who, it must be hoped, will not lend a hand to the destruction of religion in the Holy Land," the advertisement said.

The powerful ultra-Orthodox Shas party, with 17 deputies, has already endorsed Sharon.

"We must vote for Sharon, because if Barak is re-elected he will want to take revenge upon us and take away our schools," Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef told his faithful Saturday.

Shas, which runs a vast network of social programs and schools for its followers, played a crucial role in the downfall of the Barak government, withdrawing its support when Barak decided to start final settlement talks with the Palestinians at Camp David in July.

Whoever wins Tuesday will have to deal with the continuation of the seething violence in the Palestinian territories following the failure of the latest round of peace talks in Egypt last month.

The National and Islamic Forces called for mass demonstrations on Tuesday "that will affirm the continuation of the intifada as a basic struggle option towards achieving the goals of our people and to commemorate the martyrs of the intifada."