

Indian FM to visit US next month

Reuters, Washington

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh will visit Washington early next month for talks on security and other topics with Secretary of State Colin Powell, US officials said on Monday.

It would be the highest level contact between the government in New Delhi and the two-month-old administration of President George W. Bush.

Singh, who recently has also taken on the charge of the defence ministry, will be in Washington "the first week in April," an official said. The exact date is expected to be announced in New Delhi.

He is not expected to meet Bush but likely will see Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in view of Singh's new defence responsibilities, officials said.

Indonesian babies being smuggled into Malaysia

AP, Kuala Lumpur

A visiting Indonesian official said babies were being smuggled into Malaysia by Indonesian syndicates alongside timber, narcotics and fuel, news reports said Tuesday.

Indonesian Marine Police Senior Inspector Dedy Fardika said his officers foiled attempts at baby smuggling at a rate of about two each month, The Star newspaper reported.

Dedy said most of the smuggled babies were aged between three and 12 months, and came from unmarried mothers or women abandoned by their husbands.

"Normally the syndicate has ready buyers in Malaysia before transporting the babies over," the Star quoted Dedy as saying.

Babies had been found hidden in compartments near the engine of smugglers' boats. Some babies died before reaching Malaysia.

Peninsula Malaysia and Indonesia are separated by the narrow Malacca Straits, which are easily and often crossed by illegal immigrants and smugglers.

Sharon accuses PA of stepping up terrorism

AP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon got the Bush administration's support for his go-slow diplomacy and denounced Yasser Arafat's elite guard for "terror activities."

The ex-general said Monday that Palestinian leader Arafat "must understand, first and foremost, that he will gain nothing from violence. Israel will not negotiate while Israeli civilians and soldiers are under fire."

Sharon's two-day visit was marred even before he arrived by new attacks on Israeli Jews. Speaking for Sharon in Jerusalem, a spokesman accused Arafat's Palestinian Authority of "deepening its involvement in incitement of violence and terror" and of "closing ranks with militant fundamentalists."

In Washington, US Secretary of State Colin Powell renewed a pledge to stand by Israel and criticized Arab governments for withdrawing their ambassadors from Tel Aviv. "These states should be voices of moderation," Powell said in a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a AIPAC, the leading pro-Israel lobby.

Meeting with Sharon later, Powell stressed the need to ease economic pressure on the Palestinians and

supported the idea of direct discussions with the Palestinians to rebuild confidence, a senior State Department official said.

The official said Sharon's view was that it is difficult to make progress before the violence stops. As for releasing tax revenues to the Palestinians, Sharon said he feared some of the resources would go to people who do the shooting, the official said.

From another perspective, Defence Secretary Donald H Rumsfeld told Sharon in an hour-long meeting at the US Defence Department that "Israel is a small country, and you can't allow yourself to make big mistakes," an Israeli statement said.

Sharon's office also said President George W Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, assured the prime minister that the United States will urge Arafat to halt Palestinian violence. Sharon was to meet with Bush in the White House yesterday.

In his speech Monday night to the lobbying group AIPAC, Sharon said Israel was feeling the sting of a new wave of international terrorism, on the rise from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

"Terrorism as a form of warfare is a strategic issue in our region," Sharon said.

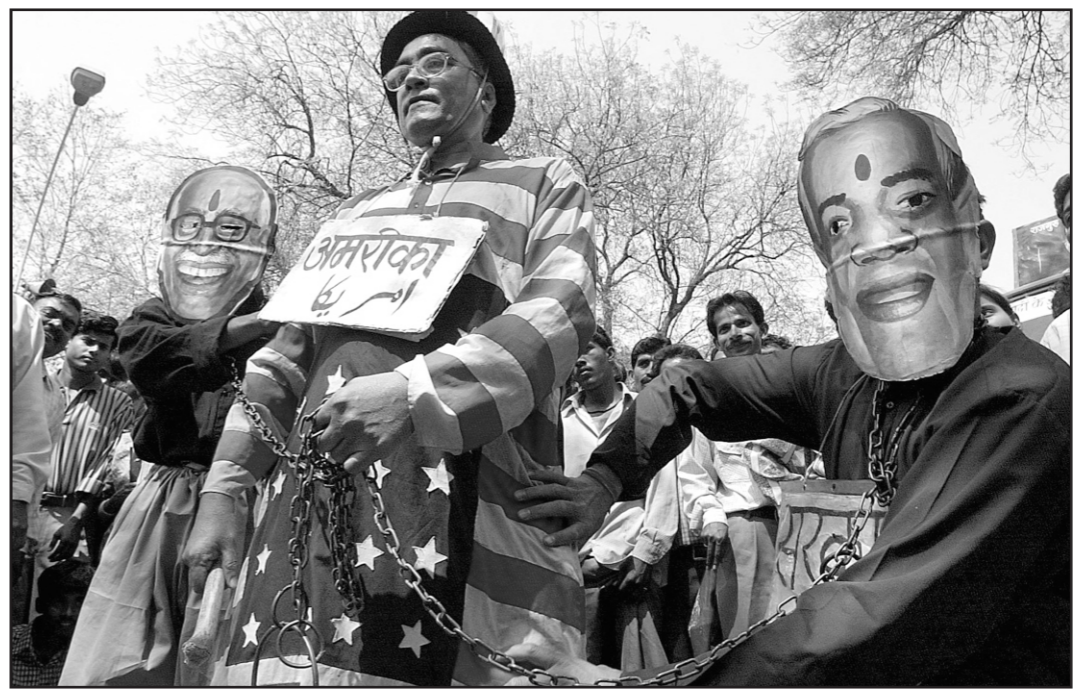


PHOTO: AFP

Men wearing masks of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) and Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani (L) press the hands of a man (C) dressed symbolically as the American President, to mockingly show lengths Indian politicians go to appease foreign powers, during a street theatre staged by women's organisations in New Delhi yesterday. The play is aimed at exposing and creating a public opinion against corruption among politicians in wake of a damaging bribery scandal involving several members of the government.

Charges in bribery scam baseless: Indian officials

Army begins internal probe

AFP, New Delhi

Two key advisors to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Monday defended themselves against allegations of corruption, even as the army began a probe into charges of graft against senior officers implicated in an arms bribery scandal.

"The allegations (of accepting bribes for awarding defence contracts) ... are baseless," Brajesh Mishra, principal secretary to Vajpayee and national security advisor told reporters in the Indian capital.

The scandal, which erupted March 13, surrounds a video expose by a website, showing senior politicians, bureaucrats and army officials apparently taking

bribes.

Though never shown taking any money, Mishra had been named several times in the video footage, particularly by Bangaru Laxman, president of Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, as being influential in defence purchases.

The Indian army meanwhile began a probe into the conduct of its senior officers regarding defence purchases.

The government had suspended four top defence ministry and army officials last week, who were shown on the tape receiving money.

Besides Mishra, senior bureaucrat in Vajpayee's office N.K. Singh also denied using his influence to award telecom contracts to a particular company.

The denial by Vajpayee's senior aides came amidst an escalating

war of words between the ruling coalition and the opposition over the expose, which almost resulted in both sides coming to blows outside a paralysed parliament.

The scuffles followed Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's weekend call for a nationwide assault on the scandal-tainted government.

The "first-phase" of the campaign would begin when parliament goes into recess on Saturday "with protest rallies, culminating in public meetings in every district of the country," said Congress spokesman Jaipal Reddy.

Parliament has not been allowed to function since the scandal erupted and looks set to remain paralysed all this week as the opposition keeps up its demands that the prime minister and his cabinet resign.

250 political activists arrested in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police yesterday detained hundreds of members of political parties to stop a rally for the restoration of democracy planned later this week, officials and politicians said.

Police raided the homes of politicians and party activists throughout Lahore, the capital of central Punjab province, ahead of the rally there on Friday, or Pakistan Day, they said.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) deputy secretary of information Altaf Ahmed Qureshi said "several hundred" people from the two major parties had been detained, while an official source put the number at 250.

"The raids are still going on," Qureshi said.

It is not the first time the military government of General Pervez Musharraf has used police to round-up political opponents to prevent opposition demonstrations.

14 killed as bus crashes into river in China

AP, Beijing

A bus crammed so full that passengers were sleeping on the floor rolled and plunged into a river in southern China, killing 14, a police officer said Tuesday.

The bus, built for 26 people but carrying 31, lost control and careened off the road just before midnight Sunday in Guangdong province, said a traffic officer who refused to give his name.

Many passengers were apparently asleep, some in the aisle, when the bus dropped into the river. Survivors punched out windows before swimming to safety, he said.

Police in Gongyuan county, where the accident happened, believe the driver was speeding, the officer said.

Fiji goes to polls Aug 27

AFP, Suva

Failed businessman George Speight and special forces soldiers seized parliament on May 19 last year taking hostage the government of then prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, elected to office exactly a year earlier.

While they were being held the government was dismissed and martial law declared. Eventually an interim government was installed in the Pacific island nation.

The election announcement followed a meeting of the caretaker cabinet that was sworn in on Friday by President Josefa Iloilo after he dissolved parliament.



PHOTO: AFP

A convoy of German KFOR troops and vehicles enters the city of Tetovo, some 50 km northeast of Skopje, on Monday. The Macedonian Army has stepped up efforts to clear Albanian rebels out of their mountain strongholds at the Kosovo border, reclaiming ground and forcing insurgents to rethink their tactics.

Cosmonauts, scientists assemble to watch Mir's final descent

AFP, Suva

A group of 50 scientists, space enthusiasts and retired Russian cosmonauts assembled in Fiji Tuesday to witness the destruction of the Russian space station Mir in the Pacific skies.

The 15-year-old orbiter is expected to plunge into the ocean southeast of here on Friday and the scientists plan to be in aircraft near by.

A private expedition organised by the American Foundation for the Future organisation includes five Russian scientists.

Among them is Leonid Gorshkov, a top Russian space station designer and one of the chief architects of Mir.

The other four are cosmonauts Serdey Avdeyev, who flew missions to Mir, one of which lasted a year, Sergey Zaitin, the cosmonaut commander of the final mission to Mir, Elena Kondakova and Vladimir Titov.

The Russians went snorkelling in waters around an exclusive resort in Nadi Tuesday as they waited for Moscow to announce the exact time the space station will be brought down to Earth.

Russia confirmed that Mir will be ditched on Friday at 9:30 am Moscow time (1230 BST). Interfax reported.

Fiji was chosen as the observation spot because it is the closest to the point where the spaceship is expected to streak down.

"We will be able to see it as a comet in the sky ... the biggest known man made object to hit the earth's atmosphere," expedition spokesman Peter May told AFP.

The group is equipped with the latest technology to film and record the re-entry which is expected to be spectacular -- similar to exploding fireworks as the orbiter disintegrates on impact with the Earth's atmosphere.

AIDS becoming women's disease: UN commission

IPS, United Nations

AIDS is becoming a women's disease, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) declared at the conclusion of two weeks of meetings recently.

Highlighting that "women are at the epicentre of the epidemic" the CSW urged all governments to take all necessary measures to empower women, strengthen their economic independence and protect and promote their human rights and fundamental freedoms in order to allow them to better protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

"The pandemic requires the transforming of relations between women and men to eliminate gender inequality and reduce the risk of infection," UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said.

The right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex is often violated since HIV/AIDS stigmatises women and men in gender specific ways.

Seventy per cent of worldwide infection occur through unprotected sexual intercourse, according to Annan's 2001 report on HIV/AIDS and gender discrimination.

This makes women and girls particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection owing to their biological condition as well as economic and social inequalities and culturally accepted gender roles which leave them in a subordinate position to men with respect to decisions concerning sexual relations, the report said.

"Women are not born vulnerable, but made vulnerable," Dubravka Simonovic, Chair of the CSW told reporters.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is growing with alarming speed. Estimates indicate that by December 2000, 36.1 million people were living with HIV, up from 10 million in 1990. Ninety-five per cent of those infected live in developing countries.

"Poverty is a major factor responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS, particularly among women who constitute the majority of the world's poor," Simonovic emphasized.

In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women now account for 55 per cent of the total number of people living with the virus. By the end of 2000, an estimated 10.9 million men and 13.3 million women in Africa were living with HIV/AIDS, according to the secretary general report. The joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) says that in 1999, women and men had equal infection rates.

During CSW deliberations, it was noted that violence against women contributes directly and indirectly to women's vulnerability to HIV.

Given the specific vulnerability of women and girls to the disease, the CSW raised the need for a gender-equality perspective in the upcoming special session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS to be held from June 25-27 in New York.

Court bars govt from arresting Estrada

AFP, Manila

Supreme Court judges yesterday barred the Philippine government from arresting former president Joseph Estrada until after the court resolves the legality of his ouster with finality.

The court ruled on March 2 that Estrada was no longer president and thus could not invoke immunity, but the former leader argued on Monday that the judges had erred and asked them to rectify the mistake.

The judges ordered President Gloria Arroyo's government to comment on Estrada's motion within 10 working days, the court clerk said.

They also reiterated that the government may not indict him on criminal charges until the court rules on the case "with finality", the clerk added. No timetable was set for the final ruling.

Observers said the court order had the practical effect of extending the provisional stay against Estrada's arrest. The original injunction was due to expire next Friday.

Corruption investigators announced last week that they are preparing possible indictments against former movie star Estrada, which could be delivered as early as next week, shortly before his 64th birthday.

Robinson to step down as UN rights chief

AP, Geneva

Mary Robinson, the "fearless" Irishwoman who has confronted governments with their human rights failures, says she is leaving the United Nations because her agency doesn't get enough money to do its job right.

Robinson, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said Monday she believes she can do more to defend people elsewhere.

"Many staff work under unfair pressure," said Robinson, announcing her intention to step down in September without seeking a second four-year term.

Expressing "great regret," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called Robinson "a staunch and fearless spokesperson for human rights throughout the world."

"She has made a critical contribution to giving human rights a central role in the United Nations system," Annan said in a statement issued at UN headquarters in New York.

NASA opposed to businessman's trip to ISS

AFP, Washington

NASA and its European, Canadian and Japanese partners in the International Space Station (ISS) have informed Russia that they oppose the planned flight by US businessman Dennis Tito to the station, according to a NASA statement on Monday.

The world's first space tourist is scheduled to blast off to the new international outpost on a Russian Soyuz spacecraft from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan with astronaut Talgat Musabayev and Yuri Baturin on April 30.

But his planned trip is causing increasingly sharp disagreement between Russia and other participants in the international project.

The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration is concerned that the eccentric 60-year-old, who is paying Russia's cash-strapped space agency 20 million dollars for his 10-day trip to the ISS, will get in the way of the station's crew members.

Huge dinosaur footprints found in China

AFP, Beijing

Archaeologists have discovered fossils of dinosaur footprints in northwest China which they claim to be the largest ever found, state media reported Monday.

More than 100 dinosaur footprints composed of ten groups, were found on the slope of a hill in Yongjing County in Gansu province, most of them intact, the official news agency Xinhua said.

One of the footprints was about 1.5 metres long and 1.2 metres wide.

The footprints came from at least four different kinds of dinosaurs, and the traces of their tails and excrement can also be clearly identified, said Zhao Xijin, an archaeologist with the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Experts initially estimated that the footprints were probably made at least 100 million years ago, in the late Jurassic period or early Cretaceous period, said Xinhua.