

British Foreign Secy invites Pak FM for talks

AFP, Islamabad

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook has invited Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar to London for talks next month, a high commission spokeswoman said here yesterday.

The talks will be the highest level contact between Britain and Pakistan since General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup here in October 1999.

A foreign office spokesman said Sattar had accepted the offer and the meeting would take place in June, although neither side commented on what would be discussed.

Britain has expressed concern about the lack of detail in Musharraf's plans to restore "genuine democracy" with elections before October 12 next year.

The Commonwealth suspended Pakistan from its councils, barring it from attending meetings or securing technical help.

Panja removed from all posts of Trinamool Congress

PTI, Kolkata

Trinamool Congress on Monday stripped dissident party leader Ajit Panja of all party posts, including chairmanship of its West Bengal unit for 'anti-party activities', even as a defiant Panja described the decision as 'illegal and self-destructive'.

Panja has been removed from all the posts of the Trinamool Congress since his activities have been harming the interests of Trinamool, party spokesman Sudip Bandopadhyay told newsmen here.

The decision was taken at the party's working committee meeting held at the residence of TC Chief Mamata Banerjee here.

Panja did not attend.

Panja, however, will now remain as an ordinary member, he said.

Blast at German chemical plant: 100 hurt

AP, Berlin

More than 100 people suffered slight injuries on Monday after an explosion and fire at a BASF chemical plant released a stinging cloud of gas in the western city of Ludwigshafen, police and the company said.

The injured included 50 children from a nearby elementary school and kindergarten as well as 50 to 60 BASF workers. Victims were treated for skin, eye and breathing problems, but there were no serious injuries.

Residents in several parts of the city were advised to keep doors and windows shut while the black cloud drifted overhead. The company urged people living next to the plant to wash off toys and furniture that was outside at the time of the accident.

BASF spokesman Jacqueline Engesser said the gas was released by an explosion around noon during the process of drying a powder used in ironing starch. The fire was put out in about half an hour but some 400 kilograms of the substance was released, Engesser said.

One witness reported a loud bang followed by a sharp odour.

Although it isn't carcinogenic, contact with the substance can cause eye and skin irritation, she said. The gas included nitrogen oxide, the company said.

It wasn't immediately clear what caused the accident.

Four killed in sectarian clash in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Four people were shot dead and seven were wounded in sectarian clashes between members of the Sunni and Shiite Muslim groups in northwestern Pakistan, police said yesterday.

Police said two members of the Sunni extremist group Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and two Shiites were killed in the clashes Monday in the town of Dera Ismail Khan, North West Frontier Province.

"An SSP activist Jamil Jumman was murdered by an armed assailant during an early morning attack at his house. It was followed by the murder of another SSP member around midday," police officer Mashkoor Ahmed said.

He said armed SSP members then took to the streets and fired at Shiite homes and shops.

"Two Shiites were killed and seven were wounded when SSP members retaliated," Ahmed said.

Heavy contingents of police were rushed to the area to restore order and the situation was under control, he said.

Dozens of Pakistanis have been killed in sectarian attacks this year.

'South Asian states spending more on military but not enough on children'

AFP, Kathmandu

South Asian countries are spending more on the military but not enough on their children, a UNICEF official said at the start of a regional two-day meeting in Nepal on children.

"In 1999, five South Asian countries spent close to 15 billion dollars for the military but they do not have sufficient budget ... for their children," Kul Chandra Gautam, deputy director of the UN children's fund (UNICEF), said at the start of the UNICEF-sponsored meeting.

"One of the poorest of the regions, South Asia continues to arm itself to the teeth," said Gautam, a Nepalese national. "While military spending went down by minus 29 per cent globally in 1990s, it went up in South Asia by 25 per cent."

"While we have around 22 per cent of the world's population, we have 35 per cent of the world's child deaths, 40 per cent of the world's poor, 40 per cent of the world's illiterate and a staggering 50 per cent of the world's malnourished children," he said.

"The South Asian countries have enough money to have a thriving Bollywood industry, the money to bail out loss-making state enterprises and also the money to maintain the military, but they don't have enough money for the children," he said.

The UNICEF official added, "A land of contrast, South Asia has some of the world's smartest wizards in Information Technology (IT) but yet it has the largest number of illiterates representing 40 per cent of the world's popular-

tion."

"South Asia has countries with access to nuclear devices but they don't have enough latrines for millions of its people," he said.

The meeting was attended by senior government and corporate representatives from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan.

Delegates would address child welfare programmes in their countries, a UNICEF spokesman said.

Their recommendations would be submitted with the outcomes of similar regional meetings in Beijing, Berlin and Cairo to the UN General Assembly in September.

Nepal's finance minister Ram Sharan Mahat told the meeting that the "human landscape in our region continues to be characterised by poverty, underdevelopment, discrimination, environmental degradation, social upheaval, conflict and natural disasters."

"All these factors have impact on social development and on survival, development and protection of children," Mahat said.

Foreign minister Chakra Prasad Bastola, who opened the meeting, told delegates: "The vision for a better South Asia will not materialise unless investment is made for children."

"The only viable option to achieve this goal is to work in cooperation with governmental agencies, corporate bodies, international development agencies, civil society and non-governmental organisations," he said.

Vajpayee on shaky ground

Samata Party may withdraw support

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who was re-elected on a campaign slogan of "able leader, stable government," is on an increasingly shaky ground 19 months into his second term of office.

After a smooth first year, the 76-year-old has this year been beset by a series of challenges, the latest of which is threatening to cut his National Democratic Alliance (NDA)'s parliamentary majority to just seven seats.

Vajpayee's current troubles started on March 13 when an Internet website, www.tehalka.com, screened a sensational four-hour videotaped expose of corruption in Indian political and defence circles.

The tehalka tapes showed politicians, including former BJP president Bangaru Laxman, army generals and top bureaucrats accepting bribes from undercover reporters posing as arms agents of a fictitious company.

The crisis snowballed into a major embarrassment for the 76-year-old Vajpayee. The opposition led by Sonia Gandhi's Congress party has called for the government to resign.

Laxman quit the BJP's presi-

dency within hours of the televised screening of the tapes.

Fernandes, who was then the defence minister, also resigned and another key member of the NDA, the Trinamool party with nine MPs, pulled out of the ruling coalition.

A Samata pullout would reduce Vajpayee's parliamentary majority from 19 to just seven seats.

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Congress bagged three states and was in the winning camp in another one. Vajpayee's coalition partners lost power in two states.

Mounting pressure from the RSS, a hardline Hindu nationalist organisation, is also adding up to Vajpayee's problems. The orthodox RSS is the parent organisation of the BJP and acts as a "big brother," influencing and sometimes changing government decisions.

The most recent attacks from the RSS targeted finance minister

Yashwant Sinha for his alleged "pro-West" reforms and "anti-worker" policies. Other liberals close to Vajpayee have also been hit, including key advisors N.K. Singh and Brajesh Mishra.

Vajpayee has also been put on the defensive over the failure of his unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir. The initiative has failed to stem the violence in the disputed territory and been rejected by separatists as a sham.

Whatever the outcome of the current crisis, political analysts are in doubt that the honeymoon period is over for Vajpayee's government.

"I wouldn't predict the fall of the government but the situation seems irretrievable," said Zoya Hassan, a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The BJP is constantly fighting with its allies and with the RSS. This is certainly not a good picture."

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An unidentified sand sculptor works at Hardelot Beach, north west France, on Monday during the World sand sculptors competition, which brought together ten international sculptors. The competition, whose theme is the Fontaine fables, will be judged on May 24.

AFP, Beijing

The warm welcome being given to the Dalai Lama and Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian in the United States will be seen as a calculated insult by China which detests both men, analysts said.

The Communist leadership in Beijing reviles Chen and the Tibetan spiritual leader as separatists intent on gaining independence for Taiwan and Tibet, and forcing the break-up of China.

By hosting both men at the same time -- Chen is on a stopover in New York while the Dalai is to meet President George W. Bush Wednesday -- Washington has clearly spelled out its new priorities to Beijing.

The two visits were approved despite vociferous Chinese protests. They also come against a background of deteriorating Sino-US relations and the Bush administration's suspicious and hawkish view of China.

"China will see them (the visits) as a very deliberate insult and a confrontational approach by George Bush," said Professor Lau Sui-kai, a political analyst at the Chinese University in Hong Kong.

Chen is not scheduled to meet any US officials during his 40-hour visit before he heads to Central America but he will meet influential US lawmakers.

The relatively high-profile stay is in stark contrast to Chen's visit in August last year when the previous US administration all but confined him to his hotel so as not to upset Beijing.

China considers Taiwan part of its territory and it sees any recognition of the island's leaders on the international stage as encouragement for Taiwanese independence, which it has promised to oppose with military force.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, of the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China in Hong Kong, said the two visits showed Bush was not prepared to be intimidated by China's noisy and often vitriolic rhetoric.

"Frankly the attitude of the Clinton administration, which prevented Chen

Thailand PM's wife called to testify in corruption trial

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Constitutional Court yesterday agreed to call Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's wife and brother-in-law as witnesses in the corruption trial threatening to end his political career.

Thaksin is also expected to make his debut appearance before the court later this month, to deliver a closing statement in the case which opened on April 3.

The Constitutional Court judges ordered Thaksin's wife Pojaman and her brother Bannapong Damapong to appear for cross-examination after they submitted written testimony over the graft charges.

Four legal and finance experts were also called to take the stand to testify over allegations that Thaksin concealed 100 million dollars of his vast fortune in official asset declarations filed four years ago.

The charges carry a penalty of a five-year ban from politics, which would see the prime minister turned out of office only months after he swept to power in a landslide election victory.

Thaksin indicated after hearing that his lawyers may now lodge an application for Pojaman to make another written testimony instead of appearing in person.

US launches fresh effort to end ME violence

AFP, Jerusalem

The United States embarked on a diplomatic mission yesterday to push for an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire following the release of the Mitchell report into the eight-month tide of violence.

But Israel and the Palestinians were divided over the implementation of the long-awaited report, which calls for an immediate halt to fighting and confidence-building measures including a halt to Israeli settlement activity.

The US ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, met Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to discuss Washington's plan to bring an end to the violence and pave the way for an eventual renewal of negotiations, and is due later to meet Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

But on the ground violence erupted again, with the Israeli army

reporting four mortar bombs fired on Israeli territory near the Gaza Strip and on a Jewish settlement inside the area, while overnight fighting raged on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Sharon met Indyk and US consul-general Ron Schlicher at his office in Jerusalem for two hours late Monday following the release of the report by the panel set up seven months ago headed by former US senator and Northern Ireland peace mediator George Mitchell.

"They discussed the framework and timetable for the implementation of the Mitchell commission report," a US embassy official said, adding that the two US diplomats expected to meet Arafat later Tuesday.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who spoke with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders after the release of the report, announced that the ambassador to Jordan

William Burns would be his "special assistant" to the Middle East.

He also endorsed the Mitchell report which calls for an end to the violence that has claimed more than 560 lives since September, a halt to Jewish settlements and stronger Palestinian action against terrorism.

"If they do not return to the negotiating table, they face the prospect of fighting it out for years on end," the report said.

But reflecting the hands-off approach of the administration of George W. Bush, Powell ruled out at least for now any direct negotiations in person with Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Israelis and Palestinians meanwhile argued over which should come first, a halt to the violence or a freeze on settlement activity which the Palestinians consider illegal under international law.



China sees US visit by Chen and Dalai Lama as insult

AFP, Beijing

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Vajpayee has also been put on the defensive over the failure of his unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir. The initiative has failed to stem the violence in the disputed territory and been rejected by separatists as a sham.

Opposition stalled parliament for weeks, demanding a house probe into the scam and the government faced great difficulty in passing the federal budget.

To add to Vajpayee's problems, the May 10 elections in five Indian states saw a revival of fortunes for the Congress party.

Congress bagged three states and was in the winning camp in another one. Vajpayee's coalition partners lost power in two states.

Mounting pressure from the RSS, a hardline Hindu nationalist organisation, is also adding up to Vajpayee's problems. The orthodox RSS is the parent organisation of the BJP and acts as a "big brother," influencing and sometimes changing government decisions.

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