

US seeking closer military ties with India to counter China

AFP, Washington

In a major geopolitical shift, the United States is looking to forge closer military ties with India as a counter to China and to help stabilise the world's most dangerous nuclear flashpoint, a senior US defence official said.

General Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, next week will make the highest level US military visit to India since the 1998 underground nuclear tests that set off an overt nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan and prompted US sanctions, the official said.

India signalled its readiness for a closer security relationship with Washington earlier this month by responding positively to President George Bush's US missile defence initiative, the official said.

"It reflects kind of a diplomatic revolution," the official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity in an interview Friday.

Never close, the two countries had testy relations during the Cold War when non-aligned India looked to the Soviet Union for military supplies and Washington allied with Pakistan to thwart the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Now, prompted by US concerns about China and the belief that sanctions have allowed nuclear instability to fester on the subcontinent, the administration wants to waive the sanctions and substantively upgrade its military relations with India, the official said.

Lifting the sanctions would allow India to receive military assistance and buy US-made weaponry and military equipment.

"People see us and them having a common concern in Chinese power in the Far East," he said.

Some in the administration see India as a strategic partner in the containment of China, he said, while others regard it as a coming power that has interests in common with Washington.

"In the abstract you could go down the list of common interests, common threats and you could easily conclude that we and the Indians should be

strategic allies cooperating to contain the Chinese threat," he said.

But, he cautioned, "a good part of the Indian establishment probably mistrust us more than they mistrust the Chinese."

The official said it would take at least several months to lift the sanctions but "there is a disposition to get beyond sanctions."

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage informed members of Congress several days ago that the State Department supported a presidential waiver to lift sanctions against India, and US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld also supports a waiver, the official said.

The debate now centres on whether sanctions should be lifted at once or in phases and whether concessions should be required of India, he said.

A presidential waiver would not help Pakistan because it is subject to yet another layer of sanctions imposed in response to a 1999 military coup.

The official said US military cooperation would likely be aimed initially at building relationships that would be crucial if the United States is to gain influence over the nuclear standoff between India and Pakistan.

"It's not a big stretch to spin scenarios that end up in nuclear exchanges between India and Pakistan," he said.

A key question is how far to go in helping them reduce the chance of a nuclear exchange, since even benign nuclear cooperation is viewed by arms control advocates within the administration as undermining the non-proliferation treaty, he said.

Some ideas under discussion is to focus on missile launchers, rather than on nuclear warheads and provide advice on ways to prevent accidental launches, he said.

Shared missile early warning also has been discussed conceptually with both sides, but he said it was too soon to consider anything concrete.

The administration also sees opportunities for political cooperation with India on making the case internationally for missile defence, and possibly technological cooperation down the road, he said.

Indonesia may break up, warns Wahid

AP, Jakarta

Raising the possibility of martial law, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid on Saturday warned that his ouster could trigger the breakup of the nation. He urged his popular deputy to reconsider his offer of a power-sharing plan meant to stave off an impeachment drive.

With a political crisis mounting and parliament expected to call for his impeachment next week, Wahid acknowledged for the first time that he has considered declaring martial law and dissolving the legislature. In comments to reporters, he did not say whether he had ruled out that approach.

Wahid spoke a day after Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who has emerged as his main rival, rejected his offer to surrender most of his power to her in exchange for a guarantee that her legislative allies would drop their campaign against him.

Megawati's aides said the deal is unconstitutional, but Wahid said he still hoped she would change her



mind and accept it. He also said he had no intention of resigning, asserting that his departure could plunge the country into chaos.

Wahid also said that parliament's moves against him were illegal and that he still enjoyed support from the military, even though top generals have warned him not to act against the legislature. But he stressed that he wants to end the crisis peacefully.

"The best solution is to find a political solution that will not violate the constitution," Wahid told reporters. He said the nation's major political parties could still negotiate a way out of the protracted crisis.

"The developments look encouraging," he said, without elaborating.

But lawmakers, angered by Wahid's talk of the possibility of dissolving parliament, said they were more determined than ever to press for his ouster. The 500-seat parliament has formally censured Wahid twice in recent months over allegations of corruption and incompetence and is scheduled to meet Wednesday to consider demanding his impeachment by the national

ment hearing.

Wahid, a 60-year-old Islamic scholar who is nearly blind, is Indonesia's first freely chosen head of state after four decades of authoritarian rule. The national assembly elected him over Megawati in October 1999 with high hopes of that he would deliver democratic and economic reform, but his support soon faded amid erratic policies, infighting and alleged impropriety.

He has also been criticised for failing to rein in separatist, ethnic and religious violence that threatens the unity of the sprawling nation of islands. In the latest violence, 13 people were killed Friday and Saturday in the Aceh province on Sumatra Island 1,100 miles northwest of Jakarta, where fighting between separatist rebels and the government has killed more 6,000 people in a decade.

Jakarta was calm Saturday, as speculation that Wahid would declare an emergency came to nothing, and there were no signs of increased activity by security forces.

Filipino rebels take 4 ferry passengers hostage

AFP, Zamboanga

Muslim rebels have robbed a small ferry in the southern Philippines and taken four passengers hostage, officials said yesterday.

Abu Sayyaf guerrillas in five small motorboats surrounded the ferry off the southern island of Basilan on Thursday, provincial police chief Candido Casimiro said.

The gunmen robbed the 30 passengers -- including of their shoes and clothes -- and took them to Patah island, south of Basilan, before releasing all but four a day later, he said.

The remaining hostages were being used as human shields against police pursuit, he said.

The Abu Sayyaf gained international notoriety last April when they raided a Malaysian resort and took 21 foreign and local hostages to a Philippine island.

They released many of their captives in exchange for hefty ransoms.

Four killed in Colombia blasts

AFP, Bogota

Colombian authorities Friday found and deactivated two small explosive devices near the US embassy and attorney general's office here, just hours after two other bombs exploded here, killing four and wounding 30, police said.

Police said the two devices were camouflaged in metal tubes and hidden in a sewer near the US embassy and the offices of the attorney general by still unidentified perpetrators.

Earlier, President Andres Pastrana cancelled a scheduled trip to France in the wake of the bombs that ripped through busy west-central Bogota, the latest brutal reminder of the wave of violence plaguing the country.

The blast occurred near the state's National University and the Geological Research Institute, known as Ingeominas, on busy Ciudad de Quito avenue, damaging several office and apartment buildings.

Blind American climber conquers Everest



Erik Weihenmayer, a 32-year-old American, has become the first blind person to scale Mount Everest. Weihenmayer, blind since his teens, is shown in this file photo before setting off for the 8,850-metre (29,000-ft) summit.

30 die of malaria in Assam: 10,000 affected

AFP, Guwahati

At least 30 people have died in the last week in a malaria epidemic affecting 10,000 which has swept through the northeast Indian state of Assam, health officials said yesterday.

"A maximum alert has been sounded across Assam with medical teams working on a war footing to check the spread of malaria, which has assumed very serious proportions," Assam health minister Bhumidhar Barman told AFP.

"We have exhorted the federal government to rush anti-malarial drugs and expert teams to deal with the situation."

The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and army doctors have swung into action in the worst-hit Nalbari and Barpeta districts in western Assam, where at least 20 have died in the past two days.

"At least 30 villages on the foothills bordering Bhutan are hit by malaria," Major R.K. Joshi, an army doctor supervising anti-malaria camps along villages in the Bhutan border, told AFP by telephone.

"We are providing medicines, besides collecting blood samples for smear tests and giving villagers

basic tips to prevent malaria," he added.

Doctor's say the initial symptoms of malaria are high fever and cold, and at times loose motions and stomach pain.

"Villagers often bring the patients to the medical centres very late when chances of survival becomes remote. There is still a great deal of ignorance among the locals about the fatal consequences of malaria," D.N. Rabha, a doctor in Nalbari district, said.

"People in rural areas still rely on local quacks for treatment and visit doctors in the last stage when no medicines really work."

The northeast is a known "malaria zone" with the disease claiming an estimated 500 lives annually.

"We are providing medicines and other support to the health officials in tackling malaria in Assam," Renuka Devi Borkataky, chairperson of the Assam chapter of the IFRC, said.

Health workers are cleaning swampy areas across Assam and spraying disinfectants to kill mosquitoes that spread the malaria parasite.

OIC FMs' meet calls for urgent US move to halt Israeli attacks

AFP, Doha

The 56-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) opened an extraordinary meeting of foreign ministers on Israel's "savage aggressions" yesterday with a call for urgent US intervention to halt violence.

The emir of host country Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, in an opening address called on "the American administration and President George Bush to intervene urgently" to halt the Israeli attacks on Palestinians.

"It is not possible to stay silent

about the Israeli aggressions ... or to accept an unfair policy," he said.

Qatar, current chair of the Islamic body, convened the one-day talks to "examine the dangerous situation in the Palestinian territories".

Sheikh Hamad urged members to "bring their support to the intifada to face up to the aggression."

"This meeting is called upon to adopt a unified strategy ... to force Israel to end its expansionist policy," he said.

The United States and Russia, co-sponsors of the Middle East peace process, should shoulder their

responsibilities, the emir added.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, seeking stronger international support for the Palestinians, was due to address the forum.

However, the meeting began with a divided front after several countries, including Egypt but also Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, announced they would not send foreign ministers to Qatar to protest against the fact that an Israeli trade office was still operating in Doha.

Several countries only agreed to attend the meeting -- with junior

ministers -- on the express request of the Palestinian Authority, an Arab diplomat told AFP.

Under the pressure of a boycott by key participants because of the Israeli presence in Doha, Qatari authorities announced the closure of the trade office last November on the eve of an OIC summit there.

But it has emerged that the office is still operating.

A total of 569 people have been killed since the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, broke out last September.

Now 'bearman' stalks Assam

AFP, Nalbari

With New Delhi still cowering in terror at reports of a marauding "monkeyman", a new menace has struck terror among villagers in India's remote northeast -- the "bearman".

At least 20 people have been clawed by the furry "bear-like" creature, which has staged night-time attacks even inside people's homes in far-flung villages of Assam state, witnesses and police said.

"We have been taking the reports very seriously and have asked the district administration and police to be on alert to avoid panic and confusion," Assam's Health Minister Bhumidhar Barman told AFP Saturday.

Barman visited the state's Nalbari district on Friday to make a first-hand assessment along with top police and civil officials.

"We first heard a loud bang at night. Then we saw something black and furry resembling a bear, and before the beast could attack, we switched on the lights and the creature disappeared," Ramani Nath, a school teacher in Thiu village, said.

"I have seen many people with injury marks on their body, some with minor scratches and others with cut marks on their legs and hands," she added.

Panic-stricken villagers have formed vigilante groups, armed with bows and arrows and machetes, to capture the "bearman", who reportedly has metallic claws similar to those of the monkeyman.

AP, Belgrade

Police linked former President Slobodan Milosevic on Friday to a cover-up of atrocities in Kosovo, including the dumping of bodies in the Danube River - a revelation that could help the U.N. war crimes tribunal.

The accusations, the first time Yugoslav authorities have tied Milosevic to war crimes, could pave the way for sending him to the U.N. tribunal in The Hague. Milosevic has been jailed since April 1 on charges of corruption and abuse of power.

The government is now drafting a law on the extradition of war crimes suspects to the Netherlands-based tribunal that would permit handing over suspects like Milosevic only if local courts found a basis for war crimes accusations.

The new allegations came after police investigated reports that a truck containing 50 bodies, reportedly those of ethnic Albanians, was found in the Danube River outside Kosovo near the Romanian border in 1999.

Police Capt. Dragan Karleusa said that in a March 1999 meeting, Milosevic ordered top police commanders "to remove all evidence" of civilian casualties in the crackdown in Kosovo and to remove corpses that could be subject to "possible investigation by The Hague tribunal." Those



Israeli rescuers work in the ruins of a reception hall that collapsed on May 24, killing at least 30 people in the west Jerusalem neighbourhood of Talpiti.

Wedding hall collapse 8 builders and owners arrested in Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Hundreds went from dancing at a wedding to weeping at back-to-back funerals and police arrested eight builders and owners of a banquet hall that collapsed in the worst civilian accident in Israel's history. At least 30 people were killed and more than 300 injured.

In painstaking searches for survivors on Saturday, dozens of rescue workers slowly moved chunks of rubble and twisted steel rods, using their hands, cranes and power shovels. Blocks of cement dangled precariously from thin wires above the searchers, their heads protected only by yellow hard hats.

In the night from Friday to Saturday, to more bodies or survivors were pulled out of the debris, and the death toll from Thursday night's catastrophe held steady at 24. More than 166 remained hospitalised Saturday, including 16 who were in serious condition.

The exact moment celebration turned to tragedy was captured in a terrifying wedding video. Footage broadcast repeatedly worldwide showed smiling faces on the packed

dance floor, and then seconds later, hundreds of dancers suddenly sucked into a giant abyss of orange sparks and smoke.

Police arrested eight people, including the four owners of the four-story building that housed the Versailles banquet hall on the top floor, the contractor responsible for the original construction in 1986 and the head of the company that carried out renovations three months ago.

The eighth man taken into custody was the inventor of a cheaper, lightweight construction method used in the Versailles hall and in many public buildings built in Israel in 1980s, police said. The method, using metal plates and thinner layers of cement, was barred in 1996.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said his preliminary examination of the building file disclosed findings "that trouble me very much." He did not give details.

At Jerusalem's Shamgar Cemetery, thousands attended one funeral after another Friday, including that of 3-year-old Itai Yakov Dayan.

