

# Talks on cooperation with US at early stage: Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

US talks with Pakistan on cooperation for a possible attack on Afghanistan are still at a preliminary stage, a government spokesman said Tuesday.

In Islamabad's first official comment on the status of a team of US defence officials who arrived unannounced here at the weekend, the spokesman said their discussions were only of an "exploratory" nature and designed to prepare the ground for a second US delegation which would arrive at a later date.

"This is not the main delegation," the spokesman told AFP. "They are just holding a preparatory meeting with their counterparts of an exploratory nature."

"They will discuss the situation on the ground and exchange information. The main delegation

is expected later, but we do not have any dates."

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has promised "unstinted cooperation" with US efforts to hit back at Osama bin Laden, the Afghan-based militant whom the United States suspects of orchestrating the devastating September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

But how far Islamabad goes in facilitating a US operation against bin Laden's bases or Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia is a highly sensitive issue.

Pakistan has signalled that it is willing to allow the US to use its airspace and provide logistical support for any military action.

It has also pledged to share its intelligence on bin Laden and the Taliban with the United States but insists the US has not asked to use Pakistani territory as a launchpad for a ground operation in

Afghanistan.

Radical Islamic groups have vowed to mount a violent campaign against any US military presence in Pakistan. A Qatari television station on Monday broadcast what it said was an appeal from bin Laden for Pakistanis to rise up and "repel the US crusader forces."

Four people, described as martyrs by bin Laden, died in violence linked to protests in Karachi on Friday but otherwise there has been little sign of mass unrest on the streets.

Opinion polls and the reaction of the mainstream political parties suggest most Pakistanis support General Musharraf's decision to back the United States in the crisis.

Washington has already rewarded Pakistan for its stance by lifting sanctions imposed over its nuclear programme and rescheduling 375 million dollars of the country's huge foreign debt.



Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar (2nd L) speaks to European Union (EU) foreign policy chief, Javier Solana (3rd R), during talks at the foreign ministry in Islamabad on Tuesday. The EU delegation held talks with Pakistani officials in an effort to bolster Pakistan's participation in an international coalition against terrorism.

## Bihar flood toll rises to 146

PTI, Patna

With 21 more deaths, the toll in the current spell of floods in Bihar on Monday went up to 146 while the overall flood situation improved considerably with all major rivers receding.

State Relief and Rehabilitation Department sources said two more deaths were reported from flood-hit Saran, Samastipur, Gopalganj and Siwan districts during the past 48 hours, taking the toll to 146 so far.

Water level of different rivers was likely to decrease further in the next 24 hours, Central Water Commission sources said.

Nearly seven million people have been affected in more than 4200 villages in 21 districts in Bihar. Floods have so far damaged standing crops, public property and houses worth over Rs. 500 crore.

More than 4000 boats have been engaged to distribute relief and evacuate the marooned people to safer places.

## China takes steps to secure its border with Pakistan

AFP, Beijing

China said Tuesday it was taking military measures to secure its westernmost border regions with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Asked to confirm China was sending more troops to the region, in the Muslim-majority province of Xinjiang, foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao confirmed "security measures" were being taken.

"In order to safeguard the peace and stability of China's border areas we are fully entitled to implement security measures along our border," he told a press briefing, without elaborating.

According to reports from the far western city of Kashgar, convoys of Chinese troops have been seen heading down the Karakoram highway towards the mountainous areas around the Pakistani and Afghan borders.

Zhu reiterated Beijing's determination to refuse any entry into China of Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

## US in diplomatic blitz to shape up anti-terror coalition

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell have in the past two weeks logged more than 135 telephone calls to world leaders and met more than a dozen in person in their push for a US-led anti-terrorism coalition, officials said Monday.

Bush has placed some 34 telephone calls to foreign heads of state and government and met with four of them here since September 12, the day after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the White House said.

The president's calls and meetings represent direct contact with the leaders of 31 countries from Argentina to Uzbekistan as well as the secretaries-general of the United Nations and NATO, it said.

Powell, the nation's top diplomat, made more than 100 "phone calls in the last two weeks to foreign ministers and leaders of foreign governments, all of this devoted to trying to build the coalition and get the sup-

port," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

Other calls made by Powell to Israeli and Palestinian officials were aimed at promoting high-level talks between the two sides as fighting in the Middle East continued, Boucher added.

A senior State Department official said that by midday Monday, Powell had made 103 telephone calls to his counterparts around the world, nearly all of whom urged support for the coalition formed after the attacks.

Twenty of those calls were made on September 12, the day after hijackers flew three planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon and a fourth hijacked plane crashed in Pennsylvania, the official said.

Bush made six telephone calls that day to the leaders of Britain, China, France and Russia -- the United States' fellow permanent members on the UN Security Council -- as well as close NATO allies Germany and Canada, the White House said.

## US, China, Russia back UN role in fighting terror

AP, United Nations

Secretary-General Kofi Annan's call on Monday for the United Nations to play a major role in the long-term international fight against terrorism won immediate support from the United States, Russia and China. But the world body is still struggling to decide what it can and should do.

Addressing a scaled-down meeting of the General Assembly, Annan declared that only the United Nations can give "global legitimacy" to the long-term struggle against "the unspeakable horror" of terrorism. He urged all countries to work together to strengthen international peace and security "by cementing the ties among nations, and not subjecting them to new strains."

Last week, the General Assembly postponed its annual gathering of global leaders because of security concerns following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Nonetheless, the 189 nations in the world body are going ahead with

their work programme among lower level representatives with the exception of Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov who was in New York after talks in Washington.

Backing Annan, Ivanov told the General Assembly that the United Nations should lead any global action against terrorism and warned against moves that could erode international law.

"It is necessary to strengthen and enhance the role of the United Nations as an indispensable instrument for maintaining international peace and security and for mobilizing people of the world against new, unprecedented threats," he said.

China's UN Ambassador Wang Yingfan urged all countries to strengthen cooperation "and make joint efforts for the sake of their common interests to prevent and combat all forms of terrorist activities."

"The United Nations should play an important role in this regard," he said.

## Taliban under siege as fighting rages in north

AFP, Islamabad

The Taliban's bid to cling to power in Afghanistan suffered a double setback Tuesday with opposition forces gaining ground in the north and former ally Saudi Arabia publicly washing its hands of the Islamic militia.

Emboldened by the massive buildup of US forces around the country, troops of the "Northern Alliance" opposition captured several villages in fierce overnight battles and claimed that at least one Taliban commander had defected.

The reported gains came as Saudi Arabia announced it was cutting diplomatic ties to the Taliban in response to intense US pressure to isolate the regime which has sheltered Osama bin Laden for the last five years.

Bin Laden is wanted by the United States in connection with a string of terrorist atrocities culminating in the September 11 attacks

on New York and Washington.

Pakistan is now the only country in the world to recognise the Taliban but even Islamabad no longer has any diplomats in Kabul. The United Arab Emirates cut its ties on Saturday.

Opposition spokesmen said clashes flared in three provinces across the Taliban-held north of the country, near the borders with Uzbekistan, where US forces are already believed to be based, and Tajikistan, which is guarded by thousands of Russian soldiers.

"The fighting continued the whole night and this morning," opposition spokesman Mohammad Ashraf Nadeem told AFP from somewhere near the frontlines.

Scattered fighting was continuing in Samangan, Sar-i-pul and Balkh provinces in the north, opposition sources said.

Nadeem claimed that a pro-Taliban commander, Abdul Samad,

defected to the opposition along with an unknown number of armed men Monday to the west of the strategic Dara-e-Souf valley in Samangan province.

Taliban officials, who Monday claimed to have mobilised 300,000 men in preparation for an all-out war, were unusually silent.

The Taliban's forces are believed to number between 40,000 and 50,000 and military experts in neighbouring Pakistan do not regard its claim of 300,000 experienced fighters as credible.

Despite the quickening tempo of the drums of war, there were signs of public panic over impending US strikes subsiding.

Tens of thousands of people have fled from Afghan towns and cities to rural areas or towards the closed borders of Pakistan and Iran in the last week.

## Israeli president, PM cancel meet with British FM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's prime minister and president both ducked out of meetings with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw Tuesday after he implied a link between the anti-US terror attacks two weeks ago and the crisis in the Palestinian territories.

The offices of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President Moshe Katsav cited "scheduling problems" or "technical reasons" for the last-minute cancellations.

But the sudden change of schedule came after Straw made remarks to the Iranian people that some Israeli ministers saw as an attempt to indirectly blame Israel for the strikes and even encourage attacks against the Jewish state.

## Nepal parties to continue talks with Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's political parties have agreed peace talks with Maoist rebels should continue even though they have made little progress, parliamentary sources said Tuesday.

The parties convened by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba held a two-day special meeting which ended Monday night.

Deuba wants to build a consensus before holding a third round of peace talks, the date and venue of which has not been settled.

## Signature shows Bin Laden a unhappy man

AFP, London

The signature on Osama bin Laden's statement urging resistance to "American crusader forces" shows a giant ego with a large libido and a thirst for vengeance, according to British hand-writing experts.

A team of graphologists, quoted Tuesday by the Daily Telegraph, said it revealed his motivation for sponsoring terrorism around the world, a rampant ego compensating for possible perceived childhood slights.

"He's obviously got a huge ego. He may suffer from an inferiority complex and is over-compensating through aggression and violence," suggested Caroline Murray, one of the graphologists.



PHOTO: AFP

An F/A-18C Hornet of Strike Fighter Squadron three Seven (VFA-37), "The Raging Bulls", passes over the carrier USS Enterprise (CVN 65) in preparation for landing. US and its allies are gearing up to retaliate for the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.

## US homes in on suspects 350 detained so far for probe

AFP, Washington

US investigators have picked up more than 350 people in their dragnet for suspects behind this month's carnage as the country's top law enforcer sought boosted powers to fight terror.

But even as the unprecedented massive investigation spread across the globe, fresh fears emerged in the United States that the terrorists could have been planning to use crop duster aircraft to attack the country with chemical or biological weapons.

Attorney General John Ashcroft told a congressional hearing Monday that the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service have detained or arrested 352 people, and are seeking to question an additional 392.

The number of detainees was far higher than origi-

nally acknowledged. None of the detainees has however been charged with a crime directly related to the September 11 attack, with most held on immigration or other charges.

Investigators are trying to piece together clues left by the terrorists to find trails leading to other potential terrorists -- and to the masterminds of the September 11 strikes.

Prosecutors in the eastern US state of Virginia said they charged a man Monday with fraudulently helping to obtain valid state identity cards for some of the men suspected of hijacking four jets in the deadly September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

## Russia to join search & rescue mission during US strike: Putin

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin told his nation on Monday that Russia may take part in "search and rescue missions" during a possible US attack on Afghanistan and further step up its military assistance to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.

In a speech that instantly shifted post-Cold War relations between Moscow and Washington, Putin said Russia was also willing to open its airspace -- along with those of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia that it protects -- for a "humanitarian" US-led mission in

Afghanistan.

"Russia is further ready, if necessary -- if necessary -- to take part in international search and rescue missions," a sombre Putin said in a nationally televised address from the Kremlin.

His comments directly contradicted Russian public opinion, which has come out strongly against any involvement in Afghanistan, where Red Army forces waged a brutal and ineffective decade-long war that claimed the lives of 15,000 soldiers and left the nation in trauma.

Putin's address was instantly

followed by an assurance from Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov that Russia would not get bogged down in a similar Afghan campaign.

"This is absolutely ruled out," said Ivanov, who has also been named in charge of a new Russian anti-world terror committee. "We cannot speak of such things."

Yet at the same time, Ivanov disclosed that a top team from the Pentagon would visit Moscow next week to coordinate a joint response to the September 11 strikes on the United States, which have been linked with Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden, now hiding in Afghanistan.

## Khatami, Putin agree to cooperate on terror fight

AFP, Tehran

Presidents Mohammad Khatami of Iran and Vladimir Putin of Russia have agreed to cooperate in the fight against terrorism but within the context of international organisations, the official news agency IRNA reported Tuesday.

Khatami, in a telephone call with Putin late Monday, said Iran was "ready to cooperate with Russia in the international fight against terrorism".

Tehran and Moscow should have a "greater presence" on the regional scene, especially on the issue of Afghanistan which faces US retaliatory action for the September 11

terror attacks on New York and Washington, Khatami said.

The campaign to wipe out terrorism, "an abject international development", should be "based on reason and not a spirit of sensational revenge," he added, referring to the terror attacks.

Khatami said he was "seriously worried over civilian lives" if the United States launches retaliatory strikes against Afghanistan.

Putin, meanwhile, "accepted the proposals" of Khatami on cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, stressing that "international bodies should lead the fight against terrorism" and calling for "the mobilisation of all countries", IRNA reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (3rd R) shakes hands with the mufti of Russia, Ravil Gainutdin (3rd L) during a meeting with spiritual leaders of Moslem communities of Russia in the Kremlin on Monday.

## Israel raids hotel while French FM meeting Palestinians

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police raided a hotel in occupied east Jerusalem Tuesday where French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine was meeting Palestinian officials, seizing an identity card of a French security guard, an AFP reporter on the scene said.

Several uniformed Israeli police officers burst into the hotel and tried to enter the first-floor suite where Vedrine was meeting eight Palestinian officials from east Jerusalem, including Arab League spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi.

A security guard from the French consulate and several French diplomats were involved in a brief scuffle

of pushing and shoving as they tried to stop the police entering the suite.

The police called for reinforcements as tensions in the ante-room grew. The officers finally left without entering Vedrine's suite, but first confiscated an accreditation card of a consul security guard.

They also tried, but failed, to take the accreditation card of the vice consul.

The American Colony hotel where the incident took place is next to Orient House, the unofficial Palestinian headquarters in Jerusalem that Israel shut down on August 10 after a Palestinian suicide bomber killed 15 people in an attack on a pizzeria in the city.

## Bomb hoax forces evacuation of 2 trains near Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Two high-speed passenger trains were stopped and evacuated outside the Indian capital Tuesday after being targeted by a bomb threat, railway officials said.

The trains -- the Bombay-Delhi Rajdhani Express and August Kranti Express -- connect New Delhi and Bombay, the country's western commercial hub.

At 8:25 am (0255 GMT), authorities at New Delhi railway station received a call saying a bomb had been placed in "a train coming from Bombay", officials said.

The two long-distance trains were immediately stopped a few kilometres (miles) from the capital and all passengers told to get off, but no device was found.

"It was a hoax. Both trains have resumed their journey and reached New Delhi railway station," senior railway official Akshay Kumar told AFP.

The long-distance trains carry on average 400-500 passengers each.

Security at all vital installations in India has been beefed up after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.