

SAARC to discuss terrorism, says Lankan PM

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lanka Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said yesterday that an upcoming South Asian summit would not interfere in bilateral issues between India and Pakistan but would discuss terrorism in the region.

"So far as SAARC is concerned, it (India-Pakistan relations) is a bilateral issue. If SAARC has to become a reality, we have to get cracking on the economic issues," Wickremesinghe told reporters after talks with his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee.

SAARC, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation, is a grouping of seven South Asian nations and is due to hold its next summit in Kathmandu next week.

Wickremesinghe said his discussions with Indian leaders had included talks on the December 13 attack on the parliament complex which New Delhi has blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

"We also discussed terrorism

generally ... It's a matter which will be taken up at SAARC."

Sri Lanka yesterday expressed serious concern that a man being detained in the United States for an alleged suicide bombing attempt on a Trans-Atlantic flight claimed to be one of its nationals.

Deputy Inspector General of Police G B Kotakadeniya said authorities were "highly concerned" as they had never encountered Muslim militancy on a scale that could lead to a suicide bombing.

"Islamic militancy has not been observed in Sri Lanka," Kotakadeniya told AFP. "We are very keen to get to the bottom of this, but the information we have at the moment is not sufficient to start even a rudimentary inquiry."

The suspect, identified by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation as Richard Reid, 28, was caught Saturday by a flight attendant aboard American Airline flight 63 from Paris to Miami.

DITF begins January 12

BSS, Dhaka

The 12th Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF) begins in the capital from January 12 next year.

A total of 24 countries, including the host country Bangladesh will participate in the month-long trade fair for display and sale of their goods and products besides strengthening trade and business relations among them.

The countries expected to participate this year are Canada, China, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Britain, the USA and the host, Bangladesh.

The number of the participants this year is higher than in the previous years, a commerce ministry source said.

The participants will display their products in 358 outlets this year. These include 27 pavilions, 42 mini-pavilions, 271 stalls, 10 drink corners and eight restaurants. The pavilions and stalls, have not yet been allotted.

Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury told BSS that a policy has already been formulated to allot the pavilions and stalls.



Visiting Deputy Chief of General Staff of Chinese People's Liberation Army Lt. Gen. Zhang Lee called on Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at her residence yesterday.

AL demands fresh elections

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a deep-rooted conspiracy was out there to destroy the spirit of liberation war and to push Bangladesh back to the days of Pakistan with the Pak collaborators in power. "The nation is now passing through a crucial period when the pro-liberation people are coming under planned attacks," the former local government minister said.

AL presidium members Syeda Sajeda Choudhury, Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Abdul Jalil and Suranjit Sengupta, party's Organising Secretary Mohammad Nasim and Dhaka's Mayor Mohammad Hanif, among others, spoke on the occasion.

Sajeda Choudhury apprehended that the present government might cancel public holidays like Ekushey February and Pohela Boishakh in line with the cancellation of holidays on March 17 and August 15. "Finding their places in the cabinet of Khaleda Zia, the razzakars are now launching assaults on the glorious cultural heritage of the Bangalee nation."

Former commerce and industries minister Tofail Ahmed accused the government of bluffing the

people in the name of re-exporting Indian goods, which was nothing but transhipment -- a move the BNP opposed during the AL rule.

He claimed that newspapers were largely ignoring the acts of repression by the ruling BNP activists. "The ongoing repression can only be compared with those committed by the occupation Pakistani soldiers and their local collaborators during the 1971 War of

Independence."

Amir Hossain Amu alleged that the coalition government was reshuffling the administration by replacing freedom fighters with razzakars.

Veteran parliamentarian Suranjit Sengupta said AL would definitely join the parliament session only when the party would think it fit. Referring to Khaleda Zia's call for the AL to join parliamentary proceedings, he said, "You may not know how tough the Awami League can be in the opposition bench. One Awami League MP is enough to encounter 100 BNP MPs in the House."

Mohammad Nasim regretted that the 30 years of the nation's victory in the liberation war passed in silence with the ruling coalition spreading distorted history of the war.

"There is no piece of land in the country spared from white terrorism being unleashed by the ruling quarter," the former home minister said. "No autocratic government could set such a history of tyranny in such a short period."

PM offers training facilities to Chinese military

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday offered military training opportunity to Chinese military officers in military training institutes in Bangladesh.

The offer was made when a three-member high-powered military delegation led by Lt Gen. Zhang Li, Deputy Chief of General Staff of PLA, China paid a courtesy call on the Prime Minister at her residence in the evening.

Welcoming the offer of the Prime Minister, the delegation leader said there is scope for expanding the existing co-operation in the military and economic fields between the two countries. He also said the existing training facilities for Bangladesh military officers in Chinese training institutes could be further expanded.

Describing Bangladesh and China as two most trusted friends,

General Zhang Li said the close relation between the two countries was established at the summit level meeting during the time of late President Ziaur Rahman.

Gen. Li also conveyed congratulations on her party's massive victory in the recent elections on behalf of Chinese Prime Minister and also Defence Minister.

The two other members of the delegation were Lt General Yong Jin and Major General M Zilong. Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Hu Qianwen was with the delegation.

Chief of Army Staff Lt Gen M Harun-ar-Rashid, PSO Maj Gen AM Mahmuduzzaman and Military Secretary to the Prime Minister Brig. Gen. Muhammad Ishtiaq were present at the time.

The six-member Chinese military delegation leaves today on conclusion of its four-day visit to Dhaka.

Polybag use

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State Minister for Forest and Environment Zafrul Islam stressed providing subsidy to jute bag-manufacturing projects.

He also gave assurance that polythene bag manufacturers will be rehabilitated.

The Director General of Ansars and VDP assured the meeting that 4.6 million members of his force would not use polythene bags from now on and help motivate others for the same cause.

The Chairman of Jute Mills Corporation informed the meeting that it had already opened sale centres for jute shopping bags in different parts of the capital, including Baitul Mukarram market and Adamjee Court at Motijheel.

Mills under the Corporation have been asked to keep enough stock of jute bags.

The Corporation will also promote jute bags by organising their sale in trade fairs and on cycle vans in the capital and elsewhere in the country.

By removing rickshaws we have ensured a jam-free road, but at peak hours these commercial places are so busy that traffic jam automatically occurs due to illegal parking of vehicles on the main road," a traffic sergeant pointed out.

Panthapath

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Christmas today

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tion of houses with kaleidoscopic Christmas trees, family reunions and feasts and fun with family, friends and neighbours.

People belonging to other religions will also greet the Christian community and recall the noble messages of Jesus Christ for humanity.

President Professor AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Leader of the Opposition and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina gave messages on the occasion greeting the country's Christian community.

In separate messages on the eve of the day, they wished welfare and progress of the Christian community in the country.

The President, in his message, said Jesus Christ spent his whole life to serve the distressed humanity and preached peace for the mankind. His ideals created a ray of hope for the mankind amidst war and violence in those days, he said.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia said Jesus Christ, who came to this world only to serve the distressed humanity and establish peace and justice, became immortal due to his own way of living and courage.

"I hope the holy X-mas will further consolidate the amity and fraternal relations existing between

the Christian and other communities in Bangladesh," she said.

Wishing all-out welfare and progress of the Christian community on the occasion, the prime minister called upon them and other communities to come forward to make Bangladesh a developed country in the greater national interest.

Leader of the opposition in the parliament and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina said Jesus Christ struggled throughout his life for establishing peace, humanity, justice, and the distressed in particular.

Hasina said Awami League is committed to maintain communal harmony in Bangladesh.

St Mary's Cathedral at Kakrail, the Holy Cross at Luxmibazar and churches at Tejgon, Banani, Asad Gate and Katrl in the city have organized special prayers.

St Paul's Church at Narayanganj, churches in Chittagong and other places would also observe the day with due religious fervour.

Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television will air special programmes, while national dailies will publish special articles highlighting the significance of the day, which is a public holiday.

Delhi expels

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staffer. The police said Kumar's interrogation revealed that Khan had several times asked him about security arrangements around Parliament House and to arrange a security pass for him to watch legislative proceedings.

India has accused Pakistani military intelligence of masterminding the December 13 attack on parliament by alleged Pakistan-based militants.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has accused India of kidnapping and torturing Khan and said it had lodged an official protest with Indian authorities.

"During interrogation, (Khan) he was stripped naked, severely beaten and tortured, resulting in visible and internal injuries," the Pakistan foreign ministry said.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh firmly denied yesterday any custodial maltreatment.

"We deny it completely," Singh told reporters.

Khaleda

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decorated the flight cadets with flying badges. Flight cadet under officer M Hamidul Haque was awarded the coveted Sword-of-Honour recognition for the best all-round performance in graduating.

Cadet Sergeant M Imran Khan of No-47 Ground Branch Course received the Chief-of-Air-Staff Trophy for the best all-round performance in Ground Branch Training.

Flight Cadet wing under Officer Qazi Nazrul Islam of No-44 BD (P) Course received the Osmani Gold Medal for the best performance in Academic Training while Flight Cadet M Ruhul Amin Quaderi of the same course got the commandant's trophy in General Service Training.

Squadron No-1 was adjudged champion Squadron for the winter term and awarded Academic Colour.

Among others, ministers, members of parliament, chief of the army staff, chief of the naval staff, diplomats, high, civil and military officials, parents and relations, other passed-out cadets and a large number of Bangladesh Air Force personnel attended the ceremonial parade.

The Prime Minister also witnessed a spectacular flypast of different types of BAF aircraft.

Trade talks

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existing one that expires on October 3, 2001 did not serve the country's interest. The Bangladesh-India trade agreement was signed in 1980 for three years and it was renewed for the last time in October, 1998.

Before the Eid, a joint secretary-level meeting between the two countries was held to fix the agenda for the December talks. Following the talks, Bangladesh sent the agenda and the draft of a new trade agreement to India, but it did not receive any feedback.

"We wanted to have a new trade deal at the meeting and reach an agreement on our demand for zero-tariff access. If we could have these issues solved, then we could discuss other issues including that of Indian demand for duty concession at a later stage," the commerce secretary said.

There were high hopes among the country's policy planners for a meaningful meeting as they received positive indications from the Indian side. Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman visited India early this month and had talks with the Indian prime minister. Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury also had informal discussions with his Indian counterpart Murasali Maran on the sidelines of the WTO ministerial conference in Doha, Qatar.

Pakistan freezes assets

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The chief of Lashkar-e-Taiba resigned shortly after Pakistan froze the groups assets.

India has accused Lashkar-e-Taiba and another group, Jaish-e-Mohammad, of carrying out the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament, in which 14 people, including six gunmen were killed.

Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Mohammad Saeed announced his resignation at a news conference in this eastern border city, and said the group's general council had elected a new leader, Abdul Wahid Kashmiri.

"I have decided to step down to save Pakistan from the malicious Indian propaganda and confine my activities to the preaching of religion," he said.

"Lashkar's activities will now be totally confined to Kashmir and we have already shifted all our offices to Kashmir last month," he said.

Lashkar is one of the most powerful militant groups seeking to expel India from the northern third of the disputed Himalayan state, which is divided between India and Pakistan.

The United States last week froze the assets of Lashkar-e-Taiba as well as another Pakistan-based group, Umma Tameer-e-Nau, which

it said had provided nuclear arms data to suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.

Saeed's departure, coming so soon after the asset-freeze order, suggests Lashkar-e-Taiba is coming under pressure from Pakistan, which the United States has urged to act against militant groups.

In comments made during an official visit to China Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday vowed to crackdown on Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad if they were found to be involved in the Indian attack.

"Yes, if we find evidence of it, we would like to move against them," he said. "We are already taking measures to move against all groups that are involved in any form of terrorism everywhere in the world."

Earlier, an Indian defence official in Delhi said Indian troops had destroyed a dozen Pakistani bunkers in an exchange of fire late yesterday.

Tensions between the two nuclear rivals have been running high since a December 13 suicide attack on the Indian parliament which killed 14 people, including the five assailants.

India has blamed the attack on two Pakistan-based militant groups. Pakistan President Pervez

Musharraf has said he will act against the groups if he has evidence of their involvement.

"Between eight and 10 enemy bunkers were destroyed in retaliatory fire by our troops across the Line of Control in Poonch sector while two other bunkers were smashed in Samba sub sector late on Sunday," the senior defence official told Reuters.

Three people were killed in weekend exchanges of fire across the border in disputed Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state and the trigger for two wars between the traditional foes.

Robbers loot 2 houses in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Robbers looted two houses in the city in the early hours of yesterday.

A gang of robbers entered the house of Delwar Hossain at Nagoriabari, Dakshinkhan, in the city's Uttara area.

They forced their way into the house, breaking its door open at about 3.30am. The loot, including money and gold ornaments, is worth about Tk 2 lakh.

The gang stabbed the landlord when he tried to recover his valuables from the robbers. A case was filed with the Uttara Police Station.

In another incident, robbers looted a house at East Manikdi in the city's Sabujbagh area.

The gang entered the house of Mostafa Ahmed at about 2.30am and took away money and other valuables worth Tk 1 lakh.

A case was filed with Sabujbagh Police Station in this regard.

Coach service

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after complaints from various agencies involved in planning the city's traffic system.

The owners' association of these luxury liners has very strong links with the high-ups in the government as many top political leaders and government officials, including officials of the police department, have stakes in the transport business, said a traffic official requesting anonymity.

Until recently the traffic sergeants of the metropolis were unofficially instructed 'not to disturb any long-distance bus service' operating from the city centers, according to police sources.

A source said the association nonetheless pays a huge monthly toll to top police officials. "The regular monthly payments from the long distance bus companies automatically reach the top cops and they do not want us the field level personnel to interfere with them," said a traffic department official of the city.

AP, Kabul

New Premier Hamid Karzai quickly went to work trying to heal Afghanistan's deep divisions, naming a key warlord as deputy defense minister yesterday in an apparent compromise to unite the country's often-feuding factions.

The appointment of Rashid Dostum brings into the interim government one of its early critics. Dostum, an Uzbek who controls northern Afghanistan's largest city of Mazar-e-Sharif, had been angry

US studying plan to invade Iraq

AFP, Washington

Top US military officials are studying the possibility of invading Iraq from both the north and the south in order to topple its president, Saddam Hussein, Newsweek magazine reported.

Under heavy political pressure, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been looking at a study that suggests deploying 50,000 US troops on Iraq's southern border and another 50,000 on its northern border, according to the report in an issue due out Monday.

The plans calls for sending the two armies towards Baghdad simultaneously, but strategists doubt that even that force would be enough to take the Iraqi capital, Newsweek said.

Lieutenant General Paul Mikolashek, who is commander of US ground forces in the region believes taking Baghdad and overthrowing Saddam Hussein would require forces "at least at the level" of Desert Storm when around 169,000 US combat troops were deployed to eject Iraq from Kuwait, according to the report.

However, President George W Bush and his national security team have decided that Saddam has to go, said the magazine quoting unnamed US officials.

"The question is not if the United States is going to hit Iraq, the question is when," the report quoted a senior US envoy in the Middle East as saying.

43 more graft cases

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approving purchase proposals against public interest.

Former communications minister Anwar Hossain Monju is likely to be accused of embezzling funds in the name of undertaking additional works in the construction of Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge.

Former education minister ASHK Sadeque is being implicated for his alleged involvement in corruption in marketing and printing text books, former water resources minister Abdur Razzak for alleged irregularities in the allocation of a government land at Panthapath and former state minister for planning MK Alamgir for alleged irregularities in the census project.

BAC is also preparing a number of cases against Dhaka city Mayor Mohammad Hanif for his alleged involvement in corruption in some projects under the Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) ministry.

Meanwhile, five out of seven former ministers including Hasina against whom graft cases have already been filed obtained interim bail from the High Court.

The Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka has fixed the hearing date of the cases on January 12.

The dozen graft cases filed on December 11 have been linked to purchase of Mig-29s, printing of

because three key ministries defense, foreign affairs and interior went to the minority Tajik group from Panjshir valley.

"I have just signed the latter naming him deputy minister of defense," Karzai said. "It is the first step toward a national army."

Dostum was key partner in the anti-Taliban northern alliance made up of mostly Afghanistan's ethnic and religious minorities, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and Shiite Muslims.

He has his own large army of well-trained fighters, who fought side-by-side with US Special Forces troops in taking Mazar-e-Sharif last month, the first major Taliban city to fall under the pressure of relentless American airstrikes.

A 47-year-old, whisky-drinking former general in the communist army, Dostum has a reputation for ruthlessness. His men rarely speak out of turn and stories of Dostum's ruthlessness some apocryphal abound. The stories told of men whose heads have been chopped off and their wives sold to strangers.

He will work under new Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim, who said Monday that international peacekeepers were welcome in Afghanistan for no longer than six months.

But Karzai, who has made security a top priority, quickly responded that they will stay "as long as we need them, six months as a minimum."

"Their presence "is a commitment to peace in Afghanistan, to stability in Afghanistan, and once that is accomplished they will go," Karzai said.

Pintu

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of his accomplices came to his (Khan's) office and tried to snatch the documents although the selling of bid documents had already been closed.

The legislator is a close relative of Begum Taher Akhtar, owner of Bengal Leather Industries, the bankrupt business. He had gone to the Receiver's office to snatch relevant documents to suspend the auction, Khan alleged.

The Bankruptcy Court has declared 65 persons and industries bankrupt during the last three years.

Gas, fuel & power

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The World Bank in 1996 had suggested the government to increase power tariff by five per cent every six months to adjust it to dollar rate to minimise loss. The price of electricity increased nine times between October, 1996 and November, 2000.

The power sector is mainly suffering losses due to severe financial mismanagement, and not because of low tariff, sources said. Unrealised arrears with the Power Development Board and the Dhaka Electric Supply Authority currently stand at over Tk 5000 crore. Huge power is being systematically pilfered mainly by DESA meter readers and ledger writers. But to recover these losses and to hide the weaknesses, the government is continuing with the policy of increasing tariff, the sources said.

Similarly in the gas sector, unrealised arrears have soared by Tk 1200 crore. So far, there has been no serious move by the government to update the books of Petrobangla and its affiliates. An increase in gas tariff would also affect the power production cost across the country. Gas is the main raw material for power generation.

The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) have been incurring losses by more than Tk 400 crore since 1997-98 when petroleum prices shot up unusually in the international market.

Accordingly, the government enhanced petroleum prices by 60 per cent in 1997 on the ground that international oil prices had exceeded a level of 25 dollars per barrel from a regular price of 16 dollars to 18 dollars. The government also promised to reduce the local petroleum prices when the international rate would decrease.

But the government never kept its promise although the international oil prices came down to as low as US\$8 a barrel in the following months. Instead, the BPC continued to claim that it was incurring hundreds of crores of taka in loss each year due to 'low' domestic petroleum price.

Sources said the state-run BPC is incurring losses due to mismanagement; the oil price hike had only worsened its condition. Nevertheless, the BPC pays over Tk 2000 crore a year for import of petroleum.

The country consumes more than 16 lakh tonnes of diesel, 4.5 lakh tonnes of kerosene, two lakh tonnes of petrol and one lakh tonne of octane. The BPC imports about 1.2 million tonnes of crude oil and refines the same at its processing plant to produce diesel and other allied products. It also imports 1.8 million tonnes of petrol and diesel and other petroleum products. The country usually spends around Tk 3500 crore for such imports.