INTERNÂTIONAL

US striving to ease Indo-Pak tension

China extremely worried at present situation

The United States is striving to ease tensions between nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan, a senior Pakistani government official said Wednesday.

"There is a flurry of telephone calls daily from across the Atlantic to defuse the tension," the official told AFP, on condition of anonymity.

"We are telling them (Washington) that India which is kicking up the dust is solely responsible for the current escalation. Therefore New Delhi should be asked to cool it

India said earlier Wednesday it had repositioned its guided missiles as war rhetoric with Pakistan remained at a dangerous pitch, despite Islamabad's moves against Pakistanbased Kashmiri militant groups.

Defence Minister George Fernandes said the missiles were "in position" but did not elaborate.

Media reports said the army had moved batteries of its Prithvi missiles, which can carry nuclear warheads, to the border with Pakistan

The two countries have been massing troops on their borders since India accused Pakistan military intelligence of masterminding the December 13 attack on its parliament, which killed 14 people, including the five

It demands that Islamabad act against two militant groups blamed for the attack by curbing their activities, freezing their assets and arresting their leaders.

Pakistan has already frozen the assets of the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant outfit and on Tuesday said it had arrested the head of the Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group, Maulana Masood Azhar.

But India's cabinet committee on security was due to meet Wednesday to discuss further diplomatic retaliation.

Pakistan officials accuse India of trying to gain political mileage from the parliament attack in light of the US war against global

"The Indians think that this is one opportunity where they can get the international community to brand the freedom movement in Kashmir as a terrorist movement and then put it down once for all," said the government

Defence analyst Riffat Hussain said India was bent on pushing Pakistan to the wall.

"India is in such a belligerent mood that it has left Pakistan with very little choice to manoeuvre," said Hussain, who heads the strategic studies department at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam Univerity.

"Whatever steps Pakistan may take to

defuse the situation may not be deemed enough by India as a result of the war psychosis that they have created."

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence in 1947, two of them over the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

But Khalid Mahmood, a political analyst from the Institute of Regional Studies in Islamabad, said there would be no new war. "The Americans won't let the Indians go to

war with Pakistan." he said. "War between Pakistan and India does not suit the Americans because it would adversely affect their mission in Afghanistan.

"Some of the measures which the Indians have taken so far are acts of hostility but not a prelude to the start of a military conflict," Mahmood added.

He accused India's ruling elite of trying to create a "war hysteria" but said this "is basically for domestic consumption."

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, who has backed the US campaign in Afghanistan, said Tuesday his army was prepared to face all challenges.

Musharraf will attend a regional summit in Kathmandu from January 4 to 6, said Pakistani information secretary Anwar

But Mahmood played down the prospect of a bilateral meeting with Indian Prime Minister

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

"Pakistan never runs away from dialogue and we are always ready for talks, but the desire has to be mutual," he said.

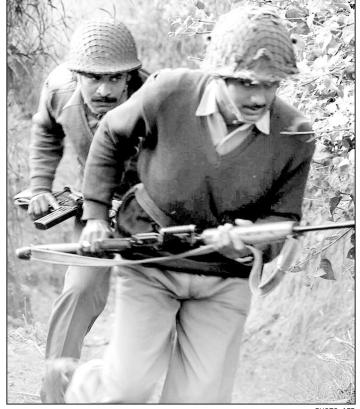
Meanwhile, Beijing said it is extremely concerned over escalating tensions between nuclear powers Pakistan and India Wednesday and urged the two sides to engage in dialogue to maintain peace and stability in the region.

"China is extremely worried over the exchange of fire that took place on the India and Pakistan border," foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue was quoted by Xinhua news agency as saving.

"As a close neighbour and friend of both India and Pakistan. China is very concerned with the development of the situation," she

India Wednesday said it had positioned its guided missiles as war rhetoric with rival Pakistan heated up despite moves by Islamabad against Pakistan-based militant

The South Asian rivals have been massing troops and armour on their borders since India accused Pakistan military intelligence of masterminding the December 13 attack on the national parliament which left 14 people, including the five attackers, dead.



Indian Border Security Force personnel (BSF) run towards a bunker near the village of Glarh, some 50 km south of Jammu on Tuesday. Indian and Pakistani troops have exchanged fire over the Line of Control (LoC) as tensions have been running high between the two nuclear powers since the December 13 attack on Indian parliament.

Pakistan detains Jaish leader

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has detained the leader of a militant group India blames for a suicide attack on its parliament as a war of words between the nuclear rivals rumbled on accompanied by cross-border exchanges of fire.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, speaking on Tuesday before Pakistan's military government said it had detained Maulana Azhar Masood, accused Islamabad

being thrust on us and we will have to face it," Vajpayee told a rally organised by the youth wing of his Bharatiya Janata Party on his 77th

Azhar's Jaish-e-Mohammad group is one of over dozen fighting India's rule in Kashmir, its only Muslim majority state.

A Jaish spokesman said police surrounding Azhar's home in the southern Punjab town of Bahawalpur would not let him leave.

"I confirm he has been detained. military government spokesman Major-General Rashid Qureshi told Reuters, adding that he could not immediately give the reasons for the



Firemen fixing fire hose in front of a burning house at Warrimoo in Sydney on Wednesday. Bushfires, which began on Christmas Day, have so far destroyed 140 properties and forced thousands of people to flee their homes.

Bush fires raging out of control around Sydney

About 75 bush fires were burning out of control Wednesday around Sydney and across Australia's most most were deliberately lit.

Strong winds continued to fan the infernos which have destroyed homes, isolated towns and cut major highways across the state of New South Wales and around Sydney, the continent's largest city.

Hundreds of extra firefighters from neighboring Victoria state were heading north to join almost 5,000 NSW emergency workers, hundreds of whom have been battling fires for five days.

No fatalities have been reported after five days of increasing numbers of fires, but a fire brigade officer was injured Tuesday when a roof collapsed on him and dozens of others have suffered minor injuries.

Dry conditions and, on

90 kilometers per hour (55 miles an hour) and temperatures above 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) have left fire crews helpless to contain the flames.

New South Wales fire chief Phil Koperberg said some of the fires had been caused by lightning, but others had been deliberately lit Officials, however, have no leads on who may have started them and have made no arrests.

Though not as extensive as the devastating blazes of Christmas 1994 when four people were killed as 284 bush fires flared across the state, the winds had propelled the fire fronts at unprecedented speeds. "We have had what is effectively

history-making behaviour," he said. "We have never seen anything like Sydney has been left blanketed

Tension between the traditional foes has surged following a by brown haze and ringed by infer-December 13 attack on the Indian parliament which killed 14 people, including the five assailants

India said on Wednesday that a war

was being thrust on it by Pakistan,

though it did not want a confronta-

tion, as tension mounted between

Three Indian soldiers have been

killed since Monday as India and

Pakistan exchanged cross-border

mortar and heavy machinegun fire.

Indian officials said hundreds of

"We do not want war but war is

being thrust on us and we will have

to face it," Prime Minister Atal Behari

Vajpayee told a rally organised by

the youth wing of his Bharatiya

Janata Party on his 77th birthday.

the two nuclear rivals across their

border in disputed Kashmir.

scared civilians fled the area.

on Pakistan-based Kashmiri separatist groups, recalled its high commissioner to Islamabad and ordered the expulsion of a Pakistani diplo-

War being thrust on India

by Pakistan: Vajpayee

The two neighbours have reinforced positions on either side of their border in Kashmir since the attack on parliament. "There is concern amongst many

India and Pakistan... concern is but natural," Vajpayee said. He said India would take any steps that were needed only after

nations on the result of war between

Vajpayee said he had a talk on Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the situation in the

Commenting on the latest exchanges of fire on the Kashmir border, a senior Indian defence official told Reuters: "Our troops

damaged at least a dozen enemy bunkers in these areas.'

India's recalled ambassador to Pakistan said today he did not rule out war between Islamabad and New Delhi, but added the situation was not irretrievable and there was still time for the nuclear-armed rivals to step back. High Commissioner Vijay K

Nambiar left Islamabad for New Delhi today, but not before warning the world of a possible escalation of hostilities between the two neigh-

that stage but the indications are not very good," Nambiar told Reuters

"Things are bad. But of course, I think one can't say they are irretrievable or things can't be improved,'

Fire breaks out at Tokyo int'l airport

AP, Tokyo

A fire broke out at Tokyo's main international airport on Wednesday, forcing the closure of the departure lobby for two airliners -- Northwest Airlines and KLM Royal Dutch

There were no reports of injuries from the fire, which has extinguished at 1:39 pm (0439 GMT), said Masaru Kato, a spokesman for the Narita Airport Authority. Kato said there was no effect on

flight schedules Wednesday at Narita, which daily handles about 360 takeoffs and landings, mostly international flights. Narita is 65 km, northeast of

Violence kills 5 in Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Two children and three Maoist guerillas were killed in separate incidents of violence in West Nepal as security forces continued operations against the rebels, government officials said Tuesday.

A Home (interior) Ministry official said two children, aged seven and 13, were killed in a bomb blast yesterday at a house at Amargadhi in Dadeldhura district.

It was not immediately clear if Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) fighters, who are campaigning to set up a one-party communist republic in the Hindu kingdom, were responsible for the blast.

Polls in Uttar Pradesh begins Feb 14

AFP, New Delhi

India's Election Commission announced Wednesday that crucial elections in the country's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh would be held in mid-February.

The commission said the poll would be held in three stages on February 14, 18 and 21.

Uttar Pradesh is being seen as a major test of strength for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Hindu nationalist BJP party, which currently holds power in the

Any swing away from the party would have major ramifications on the national political scene

2 killed as Myanmar attacks rebel base

Two Myanmar villagers were killed and another two injured Wednesday when Myanmar troops and allied soldiers attacked a rebel base near the Thai border, a Thai military source said.

Some 400 Myanmar villagers fled the early morning clash and crossed the border into Thailand, the source added. About 100 Myanmar troops and

members of the Yangon-allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) opened fire with mortars and machine guns on a base belonging to the rebel Karen National Union (KNU). The siege on the base, located in

Myanmar some 500 meters from the Thai border opposite western Ta Song Yang district, lasted about an

The KNU has fought a 51-year battle for greater autonomy against

and is one of the last major insur-

ate and close a controversial border camp housing Myanmar dissidents on Thursday, an official said. Ratchaburi provincial governor

Komet Daengthongdi told AFP Wednesday that some student dissidents living at the Maneeloy Holding Center would be moved to the Tham Hin refugee camp in western Paktau district. Another group of more than 100

dissidents not considered refugees would be handed to immigration officials at the border, he added. Komet said it would take only one

day, Thursday, to evacuate the Myanmar dissidents who fled the Myanmar junta's 1988 crackdown on pro-democracy activists.

He added that he believed there would be no violent resistance during the evacuation because the

Refugees storm Channel Tunnel to enter UK

French security guards at the Channel Tunnel entrance to try to reach Britain overnight, halting passenger and freight trains, officials said on Tuesday. British police, who joined the

hunt with sniffer dogs, said the

French appeared to have tracked down and detained all the refugees. "None of them got into Britain," said a police spokesman. The nationality of the refugees involved in the Christmas Day break-in was not immediately know, but a nearby Red Cross centre

the Middle East and Eastern "A group of about 150 people gained access to the area after having broken through electronic locks," said a spokeswoman for Eurotunnel, which runs the under-

houses illegal immigrants from Asia,

"The (security) forces at the to intercept them, so the illegals got into the two railway tunnels." she said, adding that freight and passenger traffic had been halted "for security reasons."

The tunnel was expected to

reopen later Tuesday. No one was injured in the incident, the latest in a long-running series of attempts by refugees to reach Britain where they believe they can win permanent entry and a

Train traffic through the tunnel dries up on Christmas Day which would have given the refugees a better chance of walking the 40 or so km through it undetected.

The refugees detailed by French authorities were taken to the Red Cross centre in nearby Sangatte to join about 1,000 other illegal immigrants housed there.



French policemen (L) keep watch on illegal immigrants early Wednesday after almost 150 illegal immigrants from the Red Cross-run refugee camp at Sangatte stormed the Channel Tunnel in a bid to reach Britain at the freight terminal location in Coquelles. The illegals actually destroyed the fence and stormed the tunnel.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat speaks to clerics from different Christian denominations during a meeting in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will remain "confined to quarters" in

Arafat cannot leave Ramallah where he has been marooned since the beginning of the month, until he arrests the two killers of cabinet minister Rehavam Zeevi, who Israel says are hiding out in the town.

It also wants him to jail Ahmad Saadat, the head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Ramallah. The PFLP claimed Zeevi's assassination in October in revenue for Israel's killing of its own leader two months before.

The political stand-off has

earned Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon criticism from Europe and from his own country. Many Israeli critics saw Sharon's ban on Arafat's traditional appearance at Bethlehem Christmas services as a propaganda coup for

Israeli cities at the start of December. The daily Haaretz ran a cartoon showed a beaming Arafat nailed to a crucifix.

Israeli government spokesman Raanan Gissin told AFP Tuesday that Arafat was being given a chance to peace to arrest "terrorists" and reassert his authority.

Arafat's police have closed dozens of offices of the radical Islamic groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad and arrested a number of their operatives.

A senior Jihad official said Tuesday his movement was following the lead of its larger rival Hamas and heeding Arafat's appeal for an end to attacks on Israel, in order not to give the Jewish state a "pretext" to attack Palestinian territory.

Lankan troops remanded over killing of Muslims

Sri Lankan police on Wednesday arrested 16 soldiers for alleged involvement in the massacre of 10 Muslim youths during parliamentary elections earlier this month, officials

The victims aged between 20 and 27, who included three brothers, were gunned down just after voting finished on December 5 in the worst case of violence on polling

Police officials said the soldiers arrested Wednesday were members of a unit that provided security to former junior defence minister

Anurudha Ratwatte The then opposition United National Party (UNP), which won the elections, has asked police to arrest Ratwatte after accusing him of masterminding the murders. Ratwatte has denied the allega-

Five more men from Ratwatte's security unit surrendered earlier. However, eight more soldiers were still on the run, police said, adding that a search for them was under-

25 to die in Yemen

A Yemeni court Wednesday sentenced 24 members of a 42-strong ring to death for acts of banditry and a 25th man for murder, an AFP

correspondent reported. The court also ruled that another man should have his right hand and left foot amoutated, while sentencing three others to 10 years imprisonment and a 30th defendant to eight vears in iail.

One defendant got a four-year iail term and the 11 remaining defendants were acquitted

The 42 men, all of whom appeared in court, were arrested toward the end of last year in the province of lbb, 190 kilometers (120 Their trial started four months

Those who were sentenced to death or imprisonment were convicted of carrying out armed robberies and other acts of banditry in lbb since 1990. One of them, Ihsan Hassan al-Mouj, was convicted of murdering Yehya Mohammad Abdullah in Omran province, north

New Afghan leader Hamid Karzai worked Tuesday to unify his war-battered nation, while the United States came under criticism over reports it could extend its war on terrorism to take on Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

on high alert for more terror attacks as further details emerged about the man who slipped through French security and tried to blow up a US airline en route from Paris to Miami. Karzai, sworn in Saturday as head of

Kabul's new UN-backed government, made

steps to begin uniting and rebuilding the

Elsewhere, jittery governments remained

nation that was the first target of the US campaign on terrorism, setting in motion plans for

a national army. The force would bring together troops loyal to the different ethnic warlords across the country who have reasserted their regional control since the defeat of the extremist Taliban Islamic militia.

of volunteers, ending the nearly automatic practice of forcing men and boys to fight which evolved over the past 23 years of conflict. "The army should not interfere in politics

former commander in the Mujahedin who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in

"Otherwise we won't have a democratic

and civil government," he said. Karzai, who has a six-month, UN-backed mandate before he is to convene a traditional assembly of elders to map out the nation's Atta Mohammad, a key Mujahedin compost-Taliban future, has said US troops can stay for now.

mander, told AFP the army would be made up US soldiers and their Afghan allies are still trying to track down Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born dissident said to have masterminded the September 11 attacks in the United States which killed around 3.000

Late Tuesday, Afghan security forces arrested a wounded Arab al-Qaida fighter but seven others remain barricaded with weapons and explosives in a hospital in the southern city of Kandahar, a spokesman for provin-

Meanwhile, a videotape showing Bin Laden describing preparations for the September 11 attacks that was released earlier this month by the Pentagon appeared to be succeeding in persuading Arabs that the al-Qaida leader was responsible for the mass killing in New York and Washington



Tuesday on Christmas Day. An Israeli spokesman told the AFP that Ramallah until he arrests the killers of Israeli Cabinet minister and other top

miles) south of Sanaa.

Arafat remained confined

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat remained confined to Ramallah by Israel Wednesday until he cracks down on extremists, as the Jewish state made its own moves to nab militants with a sweep of arrest in the West Bank.

Israeli government officials sav

the Palestinian leader, who had been increasingly isolated since Palestinian suicide bombers rocked

Karzai moves to unify war-devastated nation

and civilian affairs," said Mohammad, a

cial governor Gul Agha said.