

India to project Pakistan as terror sponsor to int'l fora

AFP, New Delhi

Having fired most of the heavy guns in its sanctions armoury, India will now take its case against Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism to the international community in the second stage of its diplomatic offensive, analysts say.

"The bilateral mechanisms have been more or less exhausted," said S.K. Singh, former foreign secretary and high commissioner to Islamabad. "Now is the time to utilise the multilateral mechanisms."

In a spate of bilateral sanctions, New Delhi has drastically downgraded diplomatic relations, while stopping short of closing its High Commission (embassy) in Islamabad.

Over the past one week, India's ambassador to Pakistan has been recalled and New Delhi has announced the halving of embassy staff in both countries, the closure of Indian air space to Pakistan airlines and the termination of cross-border bus and train services.

Pakistan gave a "tit-for-tat" response to most of the measures.

India said the sanctions were being imposed because of Islamabad's inadequate response to demands that it shut down two Pakistan-based militant groups blamed for carrying out the December 13 terror attack on the Indian parliament.

The crisis has raised military tensions between the nuclear rivals to dangerous levels, with both countries moving troops and heavy armour to the border.

But Indian analysts insisted there were many avenues still open to New Delhi before using the military option.

"There are hundreds of things which are yet to be done," Singh said. "The diplomatic arsenal never gets exhausted."

To begin with, New Delhi is preparing a strong case against Pakistan at next week's summit of the South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation (SAARC) -- a regional grouping of seven nations including India and Pakistan.

"We can pursue the SAARC forum. We can use the United Nations forum. We have to talk to the European Union, the G-8, the Russians... There are hundreds of things that have to be done," Singh said.

A 1998 SAARC convention against terrorism is the most likely weapon which New Delhi will use at the Kathmandu summit. The convention, to which Pakistan is also a signatory, recognises "the serious threat of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations."

"They (the member states) reiterated their firm commitment to combat these activities in the region," the convention states.

The convention also calls for a "the urgent need to complete enabling legislation" to combat terrorism in the region.

However, the SAARC summit may yet be postponed in the wake of India's air space restrictions which would require Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to make a lengthy detour to reach Kathmandu.

The Indian government is currently planning a string of high-level overseas visits to mobilise world opinion.

Home Minister L.K. Advani and Defence Minister George Fernandes are likely to visit the United States in mid-January.

Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, his deputy Omar Abdullah and National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra are expected to visit other world capitals and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has given the go ahead for groups of all-party MPs to undertake similar tours.

New Delhi will also try to pursue Islamabad through UN resolutions which carry strictures against nations found aiding and abetting terrorism.

One economic sanction India is still holding in reserve is withdrawal from a water-sharing treaty with Pakistan over the Indus River -- a drastic step that would have a severe economic and social impact on Pakistan.

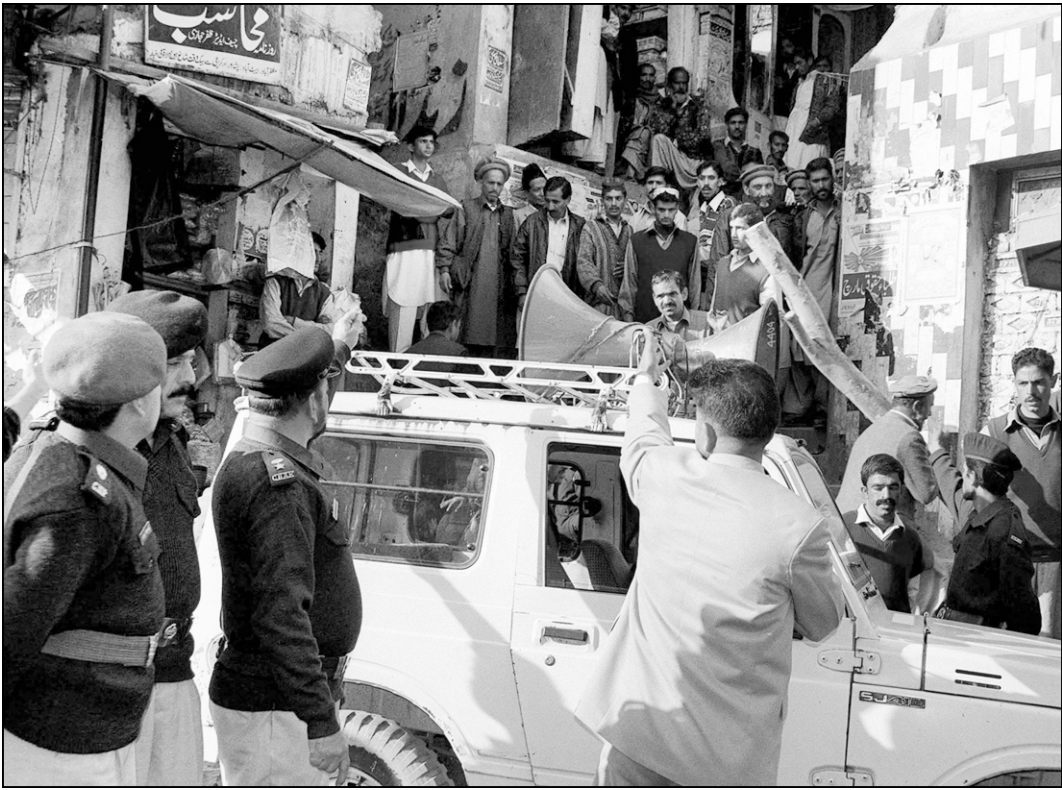


PHOTO: AFP

Authorities alert people by using loud speakers on a jeep about possible air raids by the Indian forces during an exercise in Muzaffarabad, capital city of Pakistan's administered part of disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir on Thursday. Traffic was halted for 15 minutes as air raid sirens sounded amid mounting tension in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir. The civil defence department staged the exercise in light of growing tensions between India and Pakistan.

Last bus to Pakistan leaves India

AFP, New Delhi

The New Delhi-Lahore bus left early Friday for its last journey through the troubled border between India and Pakistan whose relations have plunged into a diplomatic Cold War.

The bus departed from the Ambedkar Stadium terminal in New Delhi amid tight security at 6:25 am (0055 GMT) carrying 33 passengers including one Indian.

Last week, India announced the termination of cross-border bus and train services effective January 1 -- a step aimed at pressuring Islamabad to take action against militant groups allegedly behind an attack on the Indian parliament on December 13.

"This was the last Indian bus to Lahore," said an official of the Delhi Transport Corporation which runs the service. "It will return to New Delhi tomorrow (Saturday) evening. After that, there will be no more buses."

The bus service between the two South Asian nuclear rivals was started at the behest of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who rode on the first bus when he travelled to Lahore for a landmark summit with then Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif in February 1999.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian aides wheel the chair of former president Suharto as he leaves the Pertamina hospital in Jakarta on Friday. Ailing Suharto left the hospital after being treated for 11 days for pneumonia and other ailments.

100 killed in boat mishap in Nigeria

XINHUA, Lagos

About 100 people are feared dead in a boat mishap in Nigeria's southern Bayelsa State, local Vanguard newspaper reported yesterday.

According to the report, the tragedy occurred over the weekend on the Nun River between Ikibiri and Ikolo in Gbarain-Ikpetiano local government area of the brooky state.

Police authorities in the state Thursday confirmed the report of the accident and discovered some corpses, but could not ascertain the number of the dead.

Dengue fever kills 81 in Vietnam

AFP, Hanoi

Dengue fever is renewing its grip in Vietnam as devastating flood waters help to provide an ideal breeding ground for disease-carrying insects, official media said Friday.

Eighty-one people died from the disease this year, marking a 59 percent increase on the previous 12 months, Tuoi Tre (The Youth) newspaper said.

An epidemic of the mosquito-borne ailment, which has coincided with disastrous flooding in parts of the country, has also left more than 39,563 people sick.

Israel lifts Bethlehem blockade Most Israelis back Peres peace plan

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army lifted its blockade of the West Bank town of Bethlehem overnight, the military said in a statement Friday morning.

"The army has lifted its blockade on the town of Bethlehem during the night on the occasion of the Christmas holidays," it said.

An army spokesman said: "The lifting of the blockade will permit residents to exit and enter the self-rule zone of Bethlehem, but they will be submitted to security controls at Israeli checkpoints."

Early Friday morning, army sources said the blockade had been partially lifted, with military road-blocks dismantled at some road junctions and control measures eased.

Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer announced late Thursday that the Bethlehem blockade would be lifted to allow Christian festivities to take place.

"The lifting of the blockade tonight is aimed at facilitating the festivities and to allow Christians to reach their holy sites more easily," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Even so, Israeli forces "will remain deployed in the sector," it said.

Bethlehem, according to Christian tradition, is the birthplace of Jesus.

The statement did not say whether the blockade would be reimposed after the Christmas holidays.

On Tuesday, the army lifted its blockade on the autonomous West Bank town of Jericho, but another six cities and towns remain encircled. They are Hebron, Tulkarem, Ramallah, Qalqilya, Nablus and Jenin.

These blockades were imposed following suicide bombings in early December.

Bethlehem has been blockaded on and off, most recently in October and November.

Israel has also not lifted its restrictions on the movements of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, which it has said would continue through the Orthodox Christmas on January 6.

A government official said Arafat had wanted to attend services in Bethlehem after being prevented by Israel from attending the Roman Catholic Christmas Eve mass on Monday.

Arafat said in an interview with the London-based Asharq al-Awsat newspaper that Israel's decision to block him in the West Bank town of Ramallah was a "dangerous violation" of the Oslo peace accords between the two sides.

Meanwhile, nearly two out of three Israelis back the general outline of Foreign Minister Shimon Peres' peace plan, which calls for the speedy creation of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories, a public opinion poll revealed Friday.

Sixty-one percent of respondents favoured the implementation of a ceasefire within six weeks, followed by the creation of a Palestinian state within 42 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip -- the areas already under Palestinian control -- and eventually a final settlement.

The poll, published in the Maariv newspaper, found only 33 percent were against the Peres plan and six percent had no opinion.

Meanwhile, 54 percent of respondents favoured an intensification of efforts to reach a peace treaty with the Palestinians, "while only 27 percent favoured a military escalation."

The poll, conducted by the Gallup institute, was conducted after a significant drop in anti-Israeli attacks and a month-long crack-down by the Palestinian authorities on militant groups.

Laden seeks strikes against US 'with every available means'

AFP, Kabul

Alleged terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden has urged his followers to hit the US economy "with every available means" as an Afghan minister warned his network still posed a global threat.

The world's most wanted man, in a videotape message aired by Qatar's Al-Jazeera television on Thursday, also hailed the 19 "students" who he said "shook the American empire" when they destroyed New York's World Trade Center and crashed into the Pentagon on September 11.

It was unclear when the video, showing a tired and gaunt bin Laden, was shot, and some analysts said it might date back to November.

Although US special forces and Afghan fighters continue to search the mountains of eastern Afghanistan for signs of the Saudi dissident, there is also speculation he may have been killed during a fierce two-week bombardment.

Bin Laden said in the video that the US economy was the foundation of the country's military might, "and if their economy is finished they will become too busy to enslave oppressed people."

"I stress the importance of carrying on Jihad action (holy war or struggle) against America militarily and economically," he said.

Bin Laden also gave details of the 19 men who launched the September 11 suicide attacks that shocked the world and provoked the US campaign against Afghanistan's former leaders, the fundamentalist Taliban regime.

He said 15 of them, including two brothers, came from Saudi Arabia. Two more were from the United Arab Emirates, another from Egypt and the final one from the Levant, bordering the eastern Mediterranean.

Afghanistan's new Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni said Thursday that while the US-led war on terrorism had damaged Bin Laden's al-Qaida network, and forced it to flee Afghanistan after the defeat of its Taliban protectors, its leadership remained in place.



"Al-Qaida has only lost geography, not its leadership. Al-Qaida is a very dangerous network. The incidents of September the 11th were not small incidents," he told AFP.

As the world focused on the whereabouts of Bin Laden, an Afghan defence ministry official said he was living in the mountains on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border under the protection of a hardline Islamic leader.

Mohammad Haebeel, spokesman for Defence Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, said "reliable intelligence sources" reported bin Laden had crossed from the Tora Bora region of eastern Afghanistan into Pakistan about a week ago.

Since then, he has been staying in a tribal area controlled by Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUI) leader Fazlur Rahman, but he may have moved back and forth across the border, he said.

However, the Pakistan-based JUI said the accusations were "baseless" and an attempt to discredit the group. A top Pakistani official also dismissed the reports as "trash."

Bin Laden said the US air attacks which began on October 7 in Afghanistan showed "that the West in general and America in particular have an unspeakable hatred for Islam."

But Afghanistan's Justice Minister Abdul Rahim Karimi said the new government sworn in Saturday rejected the "clash of civilisations" theory touted by bin Laden and aims to be part of the global community.

"We want to belong to the world, to develop friendly relations with everyone, with all the Muslim nations, with our neighbours, and we completely oppose terrorism," Karimi said.

Diplomats have already begun returning to Kabul. German officials said Friday they had taken up residence in their country's mission as Berlin prepares to send 1,200 peace-keeping troops to Afghanistan.

German sources told AFP that although the embassy has not officially reopened, officials were engaged in a series of meetings.

US drafts rules for military trials of terror suspects

AFP, Washington

Pentagon lawyers have proposed unanimous verdicts for death sentences and the right of appeal for non-US terror suspects tried by military courts, leading US dailies reported Friday.

Suspects would be presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt, but hearsay and other evidence excluded in civilian trials can be admitted by the military commissions. The New York Times and Washington Post said.

The rules proposed by the Defence Department's legal counsel, are the first set down for the controversial military trials ordered by President George W. Bush last month in the wake of the September 11 terrorist strikes in the United States that killed more than 3,000 people.

Bush would decide whether a non-US terrorist suspect would merit facing a military court and the trials would likely be held outside the United States -- possibly in the US military base at Guantanamo, Cuba.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Thursday said Guantanamo was the "least worst" choice of destination for the al-Qaida and Taliban fighters captured in Afghanistan during the US-led war on terrorism. He added, however, that there were no plans to hold military trials there.

Bush's November 13 decision to have the US military try foreign terrorist suspects included provisions for the imposition of death sentences by only a two-third vote of the military commissions and denial of the right to appeal.

The draft procedures provided by administration officials mention a unanimous decision for the death penalty and the right to appeal, although without definitive language on how and where such appeals would be heard.



PHOTO: AFP

A photo dated March 1997 shows former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic (L) with his daughter Marija Milosevic (R) attending the funeral of Serbian police general Radovan Stojicic in Belgrade. Marija Milosevic is put on trial in Belgrade on Friday on charges of 'causing public danger and illegal possession of arms', for her part in resisting the arrest of her father on April 1, 2001.

Cold War heats up in South Asia

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan woke to talk of a South Asian "Cold War" on Friday, after the two nuclear rivals traded harsh diplomatic sanctions and their armed forces stared each other down on the border.

The regional crisis stemming from the December 13 terror attack on the Indian parliament deepened on Thursday as India announced a ban on Pakistan airlines using its airspace and a 50 percent cut in embassy staff in both countries.

Pakistan swiftly responded with reciprocal measures.

The turning of diplomatic screws triggered fresh expressions of concern from the international community, with the United States informing both countries that their rapidly escalating standoff could detract from its war on terrorism.

"This is something we're keeping our eye on very carefully, and we have clearly made the interests we have in this subject known to both sides very carefully and with clarity," said US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Rumsfeld also alluded to con-



PHOTO: AFP

Mariam Bibi (L), 70, cries while embracing her sister, Bismillah, 67, before she leaves Karachi for New Delhi on Friday. Mariam Bibi had to cut her visit to Pakistan short after India and Pakistan on Thursday decided to close their airspace to each other's carriers amidst growing tensions at their borders.

cerns that Pakistan may be forced to redeploy manpower from its border with Afghanistan -- where scores of troops are hunting terror suspect Osama bin Laden and his supporters.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said he was "deeply concerned" and called on both countries to "work together to resolve their differences."

But Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani made it clear Friday that India would pursue its objectives with or without international approval.

"Let the world support us. If they do not support us then that is all right too. There is no need to worry," Advani said at a paramilitary police function in New Delhi.

India says the December 13 attack was backed by Pakistani intelligence and has demanded that Islamabad take action to shut down two Pakistan-based Kashmiri militant groups it accuses of carrying out the operation which left 14 people dead.

Advani and Defence Minister George Fernandes are likely to visit the United States in mid-January as part of an Indian diplomatic offensive to mobilise world opinion against Pakistan.

Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, his deputy Omar Abdullah and National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra are expected to visit other world capitals and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has given the go ahead for groups of all-party MPs to undertake similar tours.

Cold spell claims 15 in Macedonia, 5 in Italy

AFP, Skopje

At least 15 people have died in an extreme cold spell in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, where electricity supplies have been disrupted and 10,000 sheep trapped in isolated areas could die for lack of fodder, according to reports.

Temperatures in some areas have plunged as low as minus 20 degrees Celsius, while the centre of the capital Skopje has been buried in snowfalls up to 60 centimetres with the number of car accidents tripling in the space of 10 days.

Whole areas of Skopje have been without electricity due to power failures caused by bad weather, reports said. The city power company has appealed to the public to use electricity sparingly, warning that selective power cuts might have to be introduced otherwise.

Dozens of isolated villages have been cut off from the outside world.

Reports said some 10,000 sheep risked death due to lack of fodder, and farmers had urgently appealed to authorities for additional supplies.

Meanwhile five people died and 16 people were injured in a pile-up Friday in Sicily as snowy and icy conditions caused major traffic delays.

Numerous vehicles collided and a tow-truck was strewn across the road in the crash near the town of Enna on the A19 motorway linking Palermo to Catania on the island's east coast.

Emergency workers had to rescue motorists trapped in their cars overnight Thursday by heavy snowfalls in the southeast Italian region of Apulia.

Temperatures in Venice and nearby Padua in the north dropped to minus five degrees Celsius with the Venetian countryside waking up to a freezing coat of frost.

At the top of the 3,342-metre Marmolata, the highest mountain in the Dolomites, minus 24 degrees Celsius were recorded.

Traffic was also disrupted in the Adriatic coastal areas of Ancona and Pescara.

US to send Afghan detainees to its base in Cuba: Rumsfeld

AFP, Washington

The United States is preparing to transfer prisoners from the Afghan war to a US naval base in Cuba, described by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld Thursday as the "least worse" choice.

Rumsfeld told a Pentagon press briefing that 45 Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners being held by US forces at a base in Afghanistan and aboard ship in the Gulf of Oman who will be moved to the Guantanamo base south of Havana.

Cuba, the only communist country in the Western Hemisphere, considers the base Cuban territory and is unlikely to welcome the plan.

"I would characterise Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as the least worse place we could have selected," Rumsfeld said. "It's disadvantages, however, seem to be modest relative to the alternatives."

The island of Guam in the Pacific was among other options under consideration by Washington for housing prisoners taken during the US campaign to topple Afghanistan's Taliban militia and dismantle al-Qaida, the network led by Osama bin Laden.

The 49 square-kilometer base, 1,000 kilometers south of Havana, was leased in perpetuity to the United States by Cuba's pre-revolutionary government.

Rumsfeld said no terrorists trials would be conducted there.

He added that preparations on the base to receive detainees was underway but: "It wouldn't be ready for a number of weeks to handle the kinds of people that we would very likely place there."

In a joint press conference with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers, he said the hunt for bin Laden, wanted for the September 11 terrorist onslaught on the United States, was continuing but the United States had no clear idea where the fugitive terrorist suspect was.