

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 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.

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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 Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif in February 1999.

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.

PHOTO: AFP

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 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 crackdown by the Palestinian authorities on militant groups.

Laden seeks strikes against US 'with every available means'

AFP, Kabul

Bin Laden

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 Jihadi action (holy war or struggle) against America militarily and economically," he said.

Bin Laden

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 Habeel, 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 Ulema

Al-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 every

one, 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.

Australian firefighters gear up to douse bushfire

3 teenagers arrested for starting fires

AFP, Sydney

said reinforcement crews were being drafted in from Victoria, South Australia and Queensland to ensure more than 7,000 firefighters were on duty at any time.

"There could be up to 15,000 firefighters involved as we repeat people through duty rosters," Winter said.

"There's no substantial let-up on the horizon, certainly until early next week at the very least," added Winter.

Reports said a huge volume of smoke over Sydney and surrounding areas hampered firefighting efforts Friday.

But police said the Shellharbour fires were not part of the series of major bushfires which have been burning across a large front on Sydney's southern outskirts since Christmas Day.

area burning," Winter said. "It makes it surprisingly difficult to actually analyse where the fire front is moving and assess what its impact is going to be."

Meanwhile, three 15-year-old boys have been arrested after allegedly lighting three small bushfires south of Sydney, police said Friday.

They were arrested in Shellharbour, a 90-minute drive south of Sydney, after allegedly being spotted lighting three small fires, which were extinguished by police and local residents.

But police said the Shellharbour fires were not part of the series of major bushfires which have been burning across a large front on Sydney's southern outskirts since Christmas Day.

It is very hard to identify exactly where the fire is because of the enormous amount of smoke that is being produced by such a large

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.

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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.

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