

Vajpayee asks Pakistan to shed 'anti-India' mentality

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called on Pakistan Tuesday to shed its "anti-India" mentality and crush terrorist groups on its soil to allow a dialogue on all bilateral disputes, including Kashmir.

In a special article published on New Year's Day, Vajpayee also warned the Indian people to be prepared for any eventuality in the light of the "unprecedented" crisis that has brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.

"As I have said earlier, India does not want war. But we have a sovereign right to defend ourselves against cross-border terrorism, which is a proxy war that is already thrust on us," Vajpayee said.

"Pakistan will be solely responsible for the consequences of encouraging terrorism against India," he added.

The open article released to the press was written against the biggest military build-up on the Indo-Pakistan border for 30 years, following the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament that New Delhi says was carried out by Pakistan-based militants at the behest of Pakistani military intelligence.

Islamabad has firmly denied any involvement.

The article was dominated by Indo-Pakistan ties, and contained a specific appeal to the government in Islamabad.

"Shed your anti-India mentality and take effective steps to stop cross-border terrorism, and you will find India willing to walk more than half the distance to work closely with Pakistan to resolve, through dialogue, any issue, including the contentious issue of Jammu and Kashmir," Vajpayee said.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training Muslim militants fighting Indian rule in Kashmir. Islamabad denies the charge but lends open moral and diplomatic support to what it terms the Kashmiri "freedom struggle."

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since winning independence from British rule in 1947 - two of them over Kashmir.

Vajpayee argued that India had demonstrated its sincerity for peace on several occasions, including the prime minister's 1999 landmark bus trip to Lahore, his summit invitation to Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in July this year and the government's six-month unilateral suspension of counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir, which ended in May.

"Our efforts will be further intensified, if Pakistan demonstrates its matching sincerity to have peace with India," Vajpayee said, adding that both countries should fight together against their common enemies of poverty, illiteracy, disease and unemployment.

"This is the challenge of the New Year and of the new century. Let us accept it in a spirit of cooperation."

At the same time, Vajpayee stressed that any dialogue was pre-conditioned on Pakistan making the "right choice" on combatting terrorism and called on the international community to pressure Islamabad in that direction.

"We shall triumph against terrorism -- to defend India, to defend humanity. Let this be every Indian's New Year resolve," the article concluded.

Interim Argentine president resigns

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina found itself without a leader early Monday following the surprise resignation of interim President Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, and the announcement that the next in line of succession refused the job.

By law, Chamber of Deputies leader Eduardo Camaño from the Peronist party is in charge of the executive until Congress appoints a new president. Camaño said he would call a joint session of the legislature Wednesday or Thursday to name a president.

Rodriguez Saa made his decision public in a dramatic televised address late Sunday to the nation, after spending just one week in office.

He said his resignation was effective immediately.

"I did not have any other choice," Rodriguez Saa said, saying the leaders of his Peronist party had turned their backs on him.

Nine of the party's 14 power-

broking governors snubbed the now former president by refusing to attend an emergency meeting with him Sunday to discuss ways to reshape his cabinet and economic policy, following a massive anti-government protest Friday.

Rodriguez Saa said he had

telephoned Senate leader Ramon Puerta prior to his address to inform him of the decision.

However about one hour later, a spokesman for Puerta announced the senator had resigned his post. Puerta served as president for 48 hours after the resignation of Fernando de la Rúa, and before the swearing in of Rodriguez Saa.

Rodriguez Saa, a former provincial governor, was appointed president December 23 of la Rúa resigned two years into his four-year presidential term. Congress gave him a three-month mandate until presidential elections could be held in March.

Rodriguez Saa now returns to private life, having resigned his governorship to assume Argentina's presidency.

According to news reports, at issue in the internal dispute between the fractured Peronist party was whether Saa would have stepped aside after March 3 elections, or would serve out the remainder of de la Rúa's term through December 2003.



Argentine interim President Adolfo Rodriguez Saa (C) announces his resignation, in San Luis, Argentina, late Sunday, seven days after assuming the post after Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa resigned.



Firefighters put out hotspots at the site of the fireworks explosion on Sunday in Lima. The explosion and ensuing fire in a commercial district killed at least 276 people.

Peruvians mourn as fire death toll rises to 276

AFP, Lima

Peruvians began a second day of official mourning Monday, following a blaze fuelled by fireworks in a downtown Lima shopping area that left 276 dead and 20 missing, casting a pall over New Year's celebrations.

Officials said they believe the final death toll from the fire that broke out late Saturday could exceed 300, as rescue workers continued to sift through the charred rubble.

"In many cases, it will be difficult to identify those dead because the bodies have been badly burned," said Admiral Juan Luis Podesta, chief of the country's civil defence institute, on Sunday.

Civil defence official Jose Luis Bazan said earlier the process of removing the bodies was proceeding slowly, in part because some of the charred remains were trapped in burned-out cars.

Rescue workers were using an infrared video camera to search through the debris for additional bodies, officials said. The area has been declared an emergency zone.

According to witnesses, the fire began late Saturday in a store selling fireworks for New Year's celebrations, after vendors tested firecrackers for some clients.

It quickly spread through a four-block area of historic downtown Lima packed with fireworks vendors and customers. The blaze destroyed tall buildings, several old homes, and scores of automobiles.

In recent weeks, city officials had said the area was dangerous due to the high quantity of fireworks stockpiled in shops, attics and basements.

"The fire was due to the irresponsibility of the merchants, who failed to heed the warnings and recommendations of officials," said prosecutor Maria del Pilar Peralta.

Fireworks are widely used for Christmas and New Year's celebrations in Peru.

Most of the victims were burned to death or died from smoke inhalation, according to officials, who said the tragedy was one of the deadliest ever to strike Peru's capital.

Afghan peacekeeping accord signed

AP, Kabul

More British troops arrived in the capital after complicated negotiations yielded a signed agreement on how international peacekeeping forces will operate under Afghanistan's new government, officials said.

Yesterday, a convoy carrying about 70 British soldiers pulled into Kabul to reinforce an initial deployment that has been patrolling the capital and providing security to an interim government sworn in on Dec 22.

Meanwhile, US Marines in southern Afghanistan prepared to hand over their airport base to the US Army's 101st Airborne Division. Army soldiers will assume operations at the encampment where 139 suspected Taliban or al-Qaida members are being interrogated by American military and intelligence officials in a makeshift jail.

At least 92 people were killed by US bombing around the village of Niaz Qala in Paktia province, the Afghan Islamic Press reported Monday. Witnesses told the

Pakistan-based news agency that the number of casualties may be higher. Bombs fell early Sunday in the area about 100 kilometres south of Kabul on the Gardez-Kabul highway, the agency said.

There was no immediate comment from the US military, which earlier said it hit a building about 16 kilometres from Gardez in eastern Paktia province late Friday night.

The country's interim foreign minister, Dr Abdullah, who uses only one name, had said during a Sunday news conference that US airstrikes are needed "as long as terrorist cells are in Afghanistan."

Abdullah told a news conference that Osama bin Laden may still be in the country -- another incentive for foreign help in cleaning up the mess left by the former Taliban rulers. US forces continue patrolling Afghanistan's rugged mountains, looking for the suspected terrorist and his followers.

The first deployment of peacekeepers -- British Royal Marines -- arrived days before the Dec 22 inauguration of a six-month administration. But discussions had

bogged down over the total number of needed troops and their duties.

Abdullah would not provide further specifics about the deal reached Sunday with representatives of the peacekeeping force, saying only that foreign troops will work with Afghans to provide security and are permitted to defend themselves.

The deal was signed yesterday after translations were worked out. Interior Minister Younus Qanooni signed for the Afghan government and an American general for the peacekeepers.

Some within the interim Cabinet called for as many as 5,000 peacekeepers with a visible, and proactive role. Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim wanted only 1,000 international troops performing peacekeeping duties with a low profile.

Without the details of the agreement, it was not clear what concessions were made and by whom. Abdullah said only some discussions took longer "than what was expected."

400 killed in Thai road crashes, other accidents

AFP, Bangkok

Nearly 400 people died across Thailand in road crashes, violence and other accidents in the four days of celebrations leading up to the New Year, the health ministry said Monday.

The toll was higher than for last year and the authorities said 284 of 393 people reported dead in the four days until 4:00pm (0900 GMT) came from car accidents.

"About 49 percent of people injured in road accidents are drunk," said Health Minister Sudarat Keuraphan, adding that about 200 people every hour were injured in road accidents somewhere in Thailand.

The other deaths were stabbings and shootings after drinking too much, illness after eating or drinking too much and other accidents linked to the holiday.

100 killed as US jets bomb Afghan village

AFP, Islamabad

Almost 100 people were killed when US warplanes bombed a village in eastern Afghanistan, the Afghan Islamic Press said Monday.

The Pakistan-based news agency quoted a witness as saying the planes hit the village of Niaz Qala, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of Gardez in Paktia province, on Sunday morning.

It said many houses were destroyed in several bombing raids. Some 92 bodies had been recovered and the toll could go higher, the agency said.

No immediate confirmation of the report was available.

The witness was quoted as saying there were no al-

Malaria vaccine from milk!

Scientists at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) have developed mice that can secrete an experimental malaria vaccine into their milk. The vaccine has proven effective in protecting laboratory monkeys from the malaria parasite, says a press release.

The technique relies upon transgenic animals, which are so named because they contain a gene, called a transgene, from another individual or organism.

If the procedure can be scaled up to larger milk-producing animals such as goats and cattle, it could provide a means of producing large quantities of low-cost, highly effective vaccines against malaria.

13 killed in Pak bus plunge

AFP, Muzaffarabad

At least 13 people died and 33 others were wounded when a bus plunged hundreds of feet down an escarpment in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir on Monday, police said.

The vehicle was on its way to Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, when it veered off the mountain road near the village of Lamian Pattan, about 10 kilometres (six miles) west of here, police senior superintendent Adalat Khan told AFP.

Thirteen people, including a woman, died on the spot and 33 others were injured, he said.



Firefighters battle to save a house from the flames on the edge of the small town of Hill Top located in the Southern Highlands 140 km southwest of Sydney as they battle to save the town which has been evacuated on Monday.

Sydney goes ahead with New Year party despite bushfires

AFP, Sydney

Sydney, shrouded in a pall of smoke from a 600 km ring of fire encircling the city, decided to see in the New Year in with a bang Monday.

But fire chiefs warned the relative calm of the last two days left no room for complacency as hot, blustery winds again threatened some houses on the outskirts of Sydney.

More than 500 people at Hill Top, 100 km southwest of Sydney, were evacuated as a precaution as a

fire drew closer to the village.

A police spokeswoman said the fire had become erratic, breaking off in fingers, forcing the exodus of around half the township but fire services said they were confident of protecting property.

"We have a lot of work still to be done and it's not yet time to relax and say it's over," said New South Wales Rural Fire Service Commissioner Phil Koperberg who warned the fires -- now numbering about 70 -- could blaze for the rest of the week.

"We expect if we have one and a

half days of the weather we are now experiencing then we will see a breach of the containment lines and we will have to go back to concentrating our resources on property protection," he added.

"So, as we have been suggesting all along, the relative lull, and it is relative, that we've enjoyed and used to consolidate positions in the last two or three days has been just that -- a lull in proceedings.

"This is a long campaign and people need to remain vigilant," he warned.

47 members of a family killed in South African road wreck

AFP, Groblersdal

Forty-seven members of a family in South Africa were killed and 33 more seriously injured when a truck they were travelling in overturned, police and transport officials said Monday.

"One surviving relative counted 47 people who were killed instantly," a police spokesman in northeastern Mpumalanga province told AFP.

Captain Malcum Mokomele said the driver lost control of the truck loaded with some 120 people on their way to annual family gathering when it overturned in Roossenekal, about 300 kilometres (190 miles) from Johannesburg on Sunday night.

"This is the worst accident in the past 10 years, with so many people killed at once," said Mike Mabasa, spokesman for the transport minister.

Avalanches, floods hit Europe: 5 killed

AFP, Strasbourg

Avalanches, heavy snow and flooding has hit western and central Europe resulting in at least five deaths, as well as causing major damage and travel disruption.

A man was found dead on Sunday after an avalanche hit a mountain chalet near Banska Bystrica in central Slovakia while a young boy died late Saturday when a mudslide partially covered the house where he was sleeping in the Vosges upland region of eastern France.



An unidentified woman bids farewell to her relatives on the departure of the last train to Pakistan, the Samjhauta Express, in New Delhi on Sunday. India terminated cross-border train and bus services from January 1, 2002. Military tensions between India and Pakistan have soared since the December 13 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. Both sides have been massing troops along their border and trading tit-for-tat diplomatic sanctions.

Rush for the last train home

AP, Aboard the Samjhauta Express

Torn from family reunions, weddings and funerals, hundreds of Pakistanis and Indians caught the last train home Monday, cramming into extra carriages as their war-ready government halted the 25-year-old rail service called the "Understanding Express."

Wrapped in scarves, overcoats and shawls against the winter chill, some 2,300 Pakistanis and Indians said tearful goodbyes on platforms in New Delhi, India and Lahore, Pakistan before boarding their separate versions of the Samjhauta Express.

Named with the Hindi-language word for "understanding," the train service was inaugurated in 1976 as part of a peace treaty following the last war between India and Pakistan in 1971. Journeying home from both directions before all train, bus and air service ceases on January 1, the passengers complained about their government actions, and

hoped there would be no war between the nuclear-armed South Asian nations.

With Pakistan barely two kilometers (one mile) away, Mohammed Nawaz, a 40-year-old house painter heading home from India, was happy to see no army building in the border area in northern Punjab state where passengers switched trains in the sleepy town of Attari.

"I don't think there will be another war between India and Pakistan," said Nawaz. He was happy to be near home, but said that he had to cut short a visit to meet his mother-in-law. "I had waited for the Indian visa for one year," he said.

Last Friday, India announced it was severing transportation links to pressure Pakistan to shut down Islamic militant organizations that New Delhi blames for the December 13 attack on Parliament. Pakistan denied involvement, and responded by halting the links on

its side, as both countries also cut their embassy staffs in held.

Both nations set troops, tanks, rocket launchers and extra artillery to the 1,800-km border, saying they are ready for anything, although they don't want war.

At New Delhi's main station Sunday night, two extra cars were added to the train to handle the load of about 1,000 people, twice the normal number.

The train traveled through the night. On Monday morning the exhausted passengers bundled out onto the platform at Attari, nearly 430 km northwest of New Delhi, to wait for the immigration and customs booths to open so they could board a train heading to Lahore, in Pakistan. They carried cosmetics, CDs, Indian saris and cashew nuts.

Meanwhile, as dawn broke Monday in Lahore, hundreds of men and women cried and embraced, then climbed onto the gray-green express that they call the "train of love and emotions."

6 Palestinians killed as calm shattered in ME

AFP, Jerusalem

Six Palestinian militants on apparent attack missions were killed by Israeli troops in the northern Gaza Strip late Sunday, shattering a recent calm which has created expectations for the return of the US peace envoy.

Israeli security troops killed three armed Palestinian militants who were trying to enter Israel near the village of Beit Hanun and who, according to army radio, had bombs strapped to their bodies.

"Three armed Palestinians crossed the fence into Israel from the northern Gaza Strip. Security forces saw the Palestinians, called them to stop and tried to arrest them. In response one of them opened fire," according to a statement issued by the office Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Just hours earlier, Israeli troops killed three other armed Palestinian militants as they were apparently trying to break into the nearby Jewish settlements of Alei Sinai and Nitzanit, military sources said.

The militants were allegedly trying to smuggle a bag of explosives into the settlements, but were spotted by a patrolling armoured vehicle and killed by a tank shell, they said.

Before the deadly violence, Israeli government officials had said moves were underway to secure the return of US peace envoy Anthony Zinni to the region in a bid to hammer out a ceasefire after 15 months of fighting which has claimed more than 1,100 lives.

Zinni, a retired Marine Corps general, left the Middle East two weeks ago amid raging violence that torpedoed his peace mission.