

SAARC backs war on terrorism, differs on definition

AFP, Kathmandu

South Asian leaders opened a summit here Saturday all backing the international coalition against terrorism, but with some calling for a careful study on the root causes of "dehumanising" violence.

The seven-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) urged concerted action to combat terrorism, but nuclear powers India and Pakistan appeared to differ on the definition.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, in a thinly-veiled reference to Pakistan, said "some countries" had not taken action to implement a 1987 SAARC convention on suppressing terrorism.

"We in South Asia have to recognise that our cooperative future will be significantly influenced by the way in which we can tackle terrorism together," Vajpayee said.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said his country was also a victim of terrorism and vowed to fully implement the 1987 SAARC convention on suppressing it.

"A concerted campaign against terrorism must also identify and examine the causes that breed terrorism, that drive peo-

ple to hopelessness and desperation," Musharraf said, in a clear reference to India's oppressive security apparatus in Kashmir.

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the outgoing head of SAARC whose country has faced a Tamil separatist insurgency for three decades, called for a more "honest" approach to deal with terrorism.

"We have to join our hands, at least now, more honestly and with more dedication, to fight the wave of terroristic politics that is sweeping across our region," Kumaratunga said.

She said it was insufficient to say that terrorists will be hunted down without an understanding of the causes.

"We must attempt to understand the deep-rooted cause of this most unnatural, de-humanising phenomenon very specific to the 20th century -- that is terrorism," Kumaratunga said.

Musharraf could not have agreed more.

"We cannot address only the symptom and leave the malaise aside," Musharraf said. "It is equally important that a distinction be maintained between acts of legitimate resistance and freedom struggles on the one hand and acts of terrorism on the other."

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of sponsoring cross-border

terrorism, particularly in the disputed region of Kashmir.

Pakistan maintains that the Muslim separatist insurgency in Kashmir is a just struggle for self-determination, which government spokesman Rashid Qureshi said Friday could not be called "terrorism by any stretch of imagination."

Bhutan's Prime Minister Lyonpo Khando Wangchuk condemned the December 13 attack against the Indian parliament and called for "collective efforts of the international community" to bring the perpetrators to justice.

India has said that Pakistan sponsored the attack, a charge denied by Islamabad.

"The reality of terrorism as an organised evil that will continue to haunt us and ravage our societies must be recognised," Wangchuk said.

Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba said his country, which is battling an uprising by Maoist rebels, was forced to divert money to contain the militants.

"To root out the growing menace of terrorism, we should collectively and resolutely fight against this crime and should block drug trafficking and organised crimes that finance and support it," Deuba said.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) look towards each other during the inaugural session of the 11th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Kathmandu on Saturday. The dramatic handshake between Vajpayee and Musharraf came amidst tensions between the two South Asian rivals, though Vajpayee said goodwill should be matched by action. Second from left is Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, 2nd R is Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Indo-Pak cross-border fire goes on

AFP, Jammu

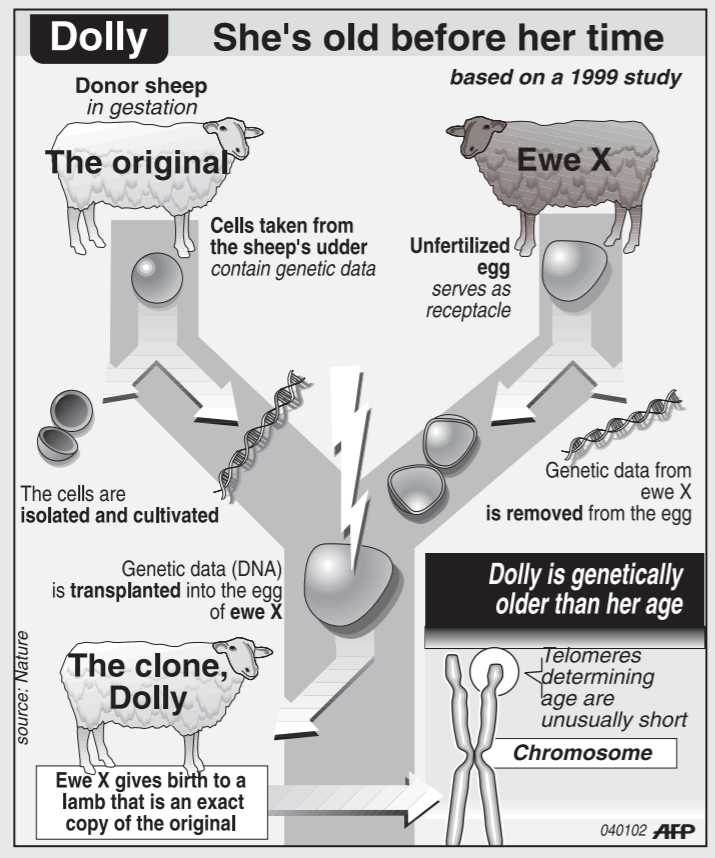
Indian villages in southern Kashmir came under mortar attack Saturday from Pakistani army units on the other side of the tense border, sparking an Indian retaliation in the area, officials said.

Municipal officials in Poonch, 240 kilometres (150 miles) north-west of Jammu, said the heavy mortar attack began at 10:00 am (04:30 GMT) and was continuing.

"At least three villages are being fired upon from across the border," Manjit Kaur, an official from the office of Poonch's chief administrator, told AFP.

An Indian army spokesman in Jammu, Kashmir's winter capital, said Indian troops were engaging the Pakistani gunners.

"The firing is continuing and it is very heavy. We have retaliated and two Pakistani soldiers are dead and six or seven bunkers are now destroyed."



'Dolly the cloned sheep had arthritis'

AP, London

The world's first cloned sheep has developed arthritis at the relatively early age of 5 1/2 years, scientists said, stirring debate that the current cloning procedures might be flawed.

The announcement of Dolly's problem could raise new doubts about cloning animals for use in human transplantation and about cloning humans themselves.

"Dolly has arthritis in her left hind leg at the hip and the knee," said the scientist, Ian Wilmut, of the Edinburgh-based Roslin Institute. "We will never know in the case of Dolly whether her condition is because she was cloned or whether this was an unfortunate accident."

He said normal sheep of Dolly's age have been known to develop arthritis, but most don't until they are older.

"But this provides one more piece of evidence that unfortunately the present cloning procedures are rather inefficient."

Dolly was born in a Scottish research compound in 1996, the world's first sheep to be successfully cloned from an adult cell. Roslin scientists announced her birth on Feb. 23, 1997, creating front-page news headlines around the world.

Wilmut said that apart from the arthritis, Dolly remained a healthy animal who has given birth to six lambs.

He also said Dolly was responding well to a treatment with anti-inflammatory drugs and that her condition will be closely monitored.

There are now hundreds of animal clones, including cows, pigs, mice and goats, many of them appearing robust and healthy. But since Dolly is the oldest one, no one knows what could happen to the rest of them in the future.

Sheep can live to between 15 and 17 years. Arthritis typically does not develop until age 10 to 11.

In some ways, Dolly remains a rarity.

China rethinking its South Asia policy

REUTERS, Beijing

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's second trip to old ally China in as many weeks appeared, on the surface, like textbook patron-client state diplomacy against a backdrop of high tension with rival India.

But after talk of an enduring "all-weather friendship" and 50 years of relations just two weeks ago, observers say this week Musharraf met with a cooler welcome from a Beijing leadership that is rethinking its strategic policy towards South Asia.

China, faced with a domestically unstable Pakistan with ties to radical Islamic groups, has been slowly but steadily taking a more balanced, pragmatic approach towards the subcontinent.

"There has been a small but significant shift in Chinese perceptions of the subcontinent in foreign policy circles," said a Western diplomat in Beijing.

China's leadership is seeking parity in relations with both countries, driven by a desire for stability on its vast border regions and lured by the prospect of better economic and trade ties with India.

"They are moving away from the old mindset," an Asian diplomat said. For the world's most populous country, there is much to gain from improving relations with Cold War rival India and approaching Pakistan more critically, analysts said.

For one, with crisis on its borders an increasing concern for China, improved relations with the two South Asian nuclear rivals give it more leverage over both to push for peace.

"China can play a very important and positive role by defusing the tension by pursuing (efforts to get) both countries to resort to political means to settle their problems," said Sun Shihai, a South Asia expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Rejection of terrorism a must for starting Kashmir talks: Blair

AFP, Bangalore

British Prime Minister Tony Blair stepped Saturday into the political minefield of India and Pakistan's bitter Kashmir dispute, saying that an "absolute rejection" of terrorism must be the starting point for any dialogue.

Addressing a business summit in the southern Indian city of Bangalore, Blair also condemned the October bombing of the Kashmir state legislature and last month's attack on the Indian parliament -- which New Delhi has blamed on Pakistani elements -- as "terrorist outrages" and assaults on democracy.

"One thing is clear. Only politics, not terror, can solve issues like (Kashmir) and the starting point of any dialogue must be the total and absolute rejection of actions such as those of 1st October and 13th December," he said.

Blair arrived in Bangalore on Friday, on the second leg of a South Asian tour that has turned into a US-backed diplomatic mission to reduce military tensions between India and Pakistan, who have massed troops on their border in the wake of the parliament attack.

Blair said the Kashmir issue and the "acts of terrorism connected with it" would feature "heavily" in his talks with Indian leaders in New Delhi on Sunday and during his visit to Pakistan, where he flies on Monday.

Blair said there was no room in civilised society for organisations like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-

Mohammad -- the two Pakistan-based militant groups India has accused of carrying out the December 13 assault in which 14 people died.

Both groups had already been banned by the British government.

At the same time, Blair gave a nod to the political separatist movement in Kashmir, saying that everybody had the right to pursue their political views by legitimate means.

"But the indiscriminate and deliberate murder of civilians to cause chaos and mutilation defies any political cause," he added.

India and Pakistan have fought two full-scale wars over Kashmir, which is divided between the two nuclear-capable rivals and has been the thorn in the side of bilateral relations for more than 50 years since their independence from Britain in 1947.

India accuses Pakistan of training and funding militants fighting to end New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir. Islamabad says it only supports an indigenous movement for self-determination in India's only Muslim-majority state.

Britain and the United States have expressed deep concern at the war moves by New Delhi and Islamabad in recent weeks, and urged India to show restraint while pushing Pakistan to crack down on Islamic militant groups.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) waves towards a section of the crowd pointed out to him by Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) President Sanjiv Goenka (R) in Bangalore on Saturday. Blair kicked off the "Partnership Summit 2002" with a speech to the gathering, saying that an "absolute rejection" of terrorism must be the starting point for any dialogue on Kashmir. Man at far left is unidentified.

US commando killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

A US Army "green beret" was killed in a firefight with unidentified gunmen in eastern Afghanistan Friday, becoming the first US serviceman to lose his life to hostile fire since the start of the military campaign nearly three months ago, US military officials said.

The Pentagon identified the soldier killed in the attack as Sergeant First Class Nathan Ross Chapman, 31, of San Antonio.

Chandrika backs Norwegian peace moves

AFP, Kathmandu

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga Saturday told a South Asian summit here that she supported a Norwegian-backed peace move by her arch political rival.

Kumaratunga, whose People's Alliance party lost the December 5 parliamentary elections, said she would support Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government in its efforts to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.

Wickremesinghe last month revived the Norwegian-backed bid to bring the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the negotiating table and both sides are currently observing a truce in the island's northeast.

'Omar escaped during surrender talks' 100 Pak militants detained

AFP, Kabul

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar has slipped through the fingers of Afghan forces poised to capture him, escaping from southern Helmand province to an unknown location, officials said Saturday.

The fugitive leader of the defeated fundamentalist regime was thought to have been besieged in a village in Baghran district, holed up with a local Taliban commander and his force of up to 1,500 fighters.

But as tribal leaders negotiated their surrender, hoping to avoid a clash with some 5,000 Afghan soldiers poised to flush them out, Omar fled the area, said Kandahar province intelligence official Nasrullah Nasrat.

"The team we had sent to Helmand province to hold talks with pro-Taliban commanders reported to us that Mullah Omar has escaped from Baghran and the whole province of Helmand," Nasrat told AFP.

"Most of the fighters besieged in Baghran have surrendered their weapons and themselves," he said, adding it was not clear if commander Abdul

Ahad had given himself up.

Nasrat vowed Afghan authorities would eventually track down Omar, who is wanted by the United States for harbouring Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind behind the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

"Mullah Omar can not escape to abroad. We will finally capture him," he said of the elusive leader who has a 10 million dollar bounty on his head.

Expectations for Omar's capture rose during the week after Ahad -- better known as Rayes Baghran -- said he would hand him over and surrender himself if the US bombing campaign in southern Afghanistan was halted.

The country's new Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah declared Friday that once he was behind bars Omar could be tried by an international tribunal as a "war criminal".

Hamid Karzai, leader of the interim administration, also said he would be willing to hand Omar over to US authorities if the Taliban leader was captured in Afghanistan.

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities have detained more than 100 activists in a crackdown on extremist organisations involved in religious militancy and sectarian violence, officials said Saturday.

"Over 100 people have been arrested in the past two days," a senior official told AFP. "These people are involved in various cases in the country."

The detainees include activists from sectarian parties and Muslim militant organisations, the official said, requesting anonymity.

Recurring sectarian violence involving militants from the majority Sunni and the minority Shiite sects has claimed more than 300 lives across the country over the past several years.

India has demanded Pakistan clamp down on Muslim extremists, after the December 13 attack on New Delhi's parliament which it blames on two Kashmiri militant groups.

Pakistani authorities last week also arrested 100 members of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, including the leaders of both groups.



US Grammy-winning group "Destiny's Child," listens to the 44th annual Grammy Awards nominations in Beverly Hills, California on Friday. Destiny's Child was nominated for Best R&B Performance by a group with vocals, Best R&B Album for solo artists, Duos/Groups, vocal or instrumental, for the awards which will be held in Los Angeles on February 27.

US may send envoy to S Asia if Indo-Pak tension prevails

AP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Friday he may send an envoy to South Asia to try to pull India and Pakistan away from confrontation.

"It's important to our international campaign against terrorism," Powell said of the Bush administration's effort to defuse the crisis.

The campaign against the Taliban and the al-Qaida terrorism network in Afghanistan could suffer if the dispute between India and Pakistan gets out of control, Powell said in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Powell said he would make a decision early next week, after a South Asia summit meeting in Nepal in which he hoped Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee of India and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf would meet.

The possible candidates for the tough assignment include Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Richard Haass, director of policy planning at the State Department.

"We will try to be helpful," Powell said. "We will encourage them to talk to one another."

Francis Taylor, a former US

Force General who is director of the State Department's counter-terrorism office, is due to go to India and Pakistan next week.

The department spokesman, Richard Boucher, said "there are other things to be done" by an envoy from Washington.

Powell and Boucher gave no indication the administration had a proposal to resolve the half-century dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, a territory they already have fought two wars over.

"Kashmir is a difficult issue," Powell said.

Afghan govt okays accord to deploy peacekeepers

AFP, Kabul

The interim Afghan government approved deployment of an international security force, as US bombing strikes in pursuit of al-Qaida and Taliban leaders continued despite concerns over increasing civilian casualties.

Shortly after the Friday ceremony marking the accord signed by British General John McCall, head of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and Afghan Interior Minister Yunis Qanooni, Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah said Omar was hiding somewhere in southern Afghanistan.

General Tommy Franks, in charge of the US operations in Afghanistan, said US intelligence indicated Omar was in the area of Baghran and Deh Rahwood, towns in the mountainous southern center of Afghanistan where surrender talks with Taliban holdouts are underway.

A US Army "green beret" was killed in a firefight in the Gardez-Khost area, the first US serviceman to lose his life to hostile fire since the start of the nearly three-month-old US campaign.