



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Tony Blair (C) meets with soldiers from the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) at the Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan on Monday. Blair's visit to Afghanistan is the first by a Western leader after the fall of the Taliban regime. Standing next to Blair is head of ISAF Maj. Gen. John McColl while Cherie Blair (L) chats with soldiers.

Blair to help rebuild Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair offered to help Afghanistan rebuild itself after years of war, as US warplanes and ground troops stepped up the hunt for Taliban and al-Qaida forces.

Blair, who flew in from Pakistan Monday on the last leg of a South Asian tour, said his visit underscored the international community's commitment to Afghanistan as it undertakes a massive rebuilding task.

"I know they have suffered a very great deal over the past 20 years," the British leader said. "I know that

military conflict is always difficult, but we do desire to be the partners of people here, in helping rebuild the country."

Blair's visit was historic as he is the first Western head of government to visit Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the first British prime minister to visit the country, according to members of his delegation.

Afghanistan's interim leader, Hamid Karzai, thanked Blair for his visit "at such a difficult time for us" and welcomed the support of the British government.

"It's very nice, generous of him to pay us this visit and our people and

government are glad and thank you very much," Karzai told reporters after their brief meeting.

Reconstruction was a top item on the agenda of a meeting Monday of the new Afghan interim government, which decided to convene a committee headed by Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah to coordinate international efforts to rebuild the war-shattered country.

Meanwhile, US warplanes continued raids Monday in eastern Afghanistan and ground troops launched a new operation against a suspected al-Qaida training camp, according to the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP).

Bush asks Pakistan to hunt down militants

Washington expects Islamabad to capture fleeing Taliban

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush warned Monday the crisis between India and Pakistan was not yet defused, and stepped up pressure on President Pervez Musharraf, urging him to intensify a crackdown on militant Islamic groups.

As his administration considered whether to dispatch a top official on a South Asian mediation mission, Bush said he was certain that a way out of the dangerous crisis enveloping the two nuclear rivals could be found.

"I don't believe the situation is defused yet. But I do believe there is a way to do so," Bush told reporters.

"We are working hard to convince both the Indians and the Pakistani there is a way to deal with their problems without going to war," Bush said in his first public comments on the affair since a weekend meeting in Kathmandu between Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The impromptu, 15-minute encounter took place at a South Asian summit in Nepal which Musharraf used to publicly grasp Vajpayee's hand in a moment of diplomatic theater. The two sides also met at lower levels.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Friday the United States would this week carefully weigh sending a senior official to South Asia in a bid to try to ease the tension.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declined Monday to use the term "envoy" or "emissary" for the mission, saying the idea was still under consideration.

"We do want to continue to find ways to urge a reduction of tensions and improve cooperation against terrorism. At this point, there are no final decisions."

Boucher said the weekend talks between India and Pakistan "coupled with greetings (between Vajpayee and Musharraf) and whatever brief words that they exchanged, we felt (were) useful."

"We're pleased that the representatives of the two sides can meet and talk. We recognized that no breakthroughs were achieved there."

The United States has expressed deep concern that the crisis could hamper its war on terrorism, centered largely in Afghanistan and with considerable help from Pakistan.

It has piled fierce pressure on Musharraf following India's demands for a crackdown on Islamic militants after an attack on the Indian parliament December 13 that left 14 dead including the five gunmen.

Meanwhile, The United States expects Pakistan to capture any members of Afghanistan's former ruling Taliban regime if they are found on Pakistani territory, a US senators said on a visit to the Tajik capital.

Senator Joseph Lieberman said that he had asked Islamabad to hand over members and leaders of the "terrorist" organisation, speaking after a meeting with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov.

His comments come after US senator John Edwards, another member of a senior US delegation touring Central Asia, said that Osama bin Laden -- the head of the al-Qaida network that supported the Taliban -- had fled into Pakistan.

Militants attack army camp in Kashmir: 3 killed

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian army soldier and two Muslim separatist militants were killed Tuesday when the guerrillas tried to storm an army camp in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.

A spokesman said three militants equipped with AK-47 rifles and grenades attempted to enter an army camp at Trehgam, 110 km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, by hurling grenades and firing automatic weapons.

One soldier was killed and another injured in the initial attack by the militants, who authorities said were apparently part of a suicide squad.

"The militants' progress was stalled near the outer gate of the camp when they were engaged in fierce encounter by the soldiers," the spokesman said.

Arab fighter blows himself up in Kandahar hospital

AFP, Kandahar

One of the seven Arab fighters barricaded in a hospital ward in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar blew himself up Tuesday, a security official said.

The Arab, of unknown nationality, believed to be a member of the al-Qaida network, committed suicide around 5:00 am (0030 GMT) after trying to flee the hospital and finding himself surrounded by guards, the official Afzullah told AFP. The bloodied and mutilated body of the man, whose name was thought to be Mohammad Rasool, was left lying on the lawn outside the Mirwais hospital.

Advani to put pressure on Pakistan during US visit

AFP, Bombay

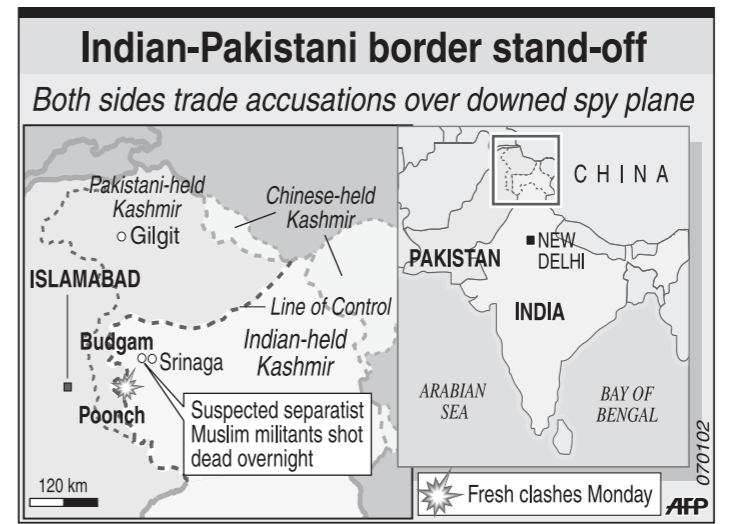
Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani left Bombay on Tuesday for a six-day official visit to the United States, where he will seek to push India's case against Pakistan as an alleged sponsor of terrorism.

Advani, the cabinet number two, is scheduled to meet US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft. He may also call on President George W. Bush, but the meeting has yet to be confirmed.

On Monday, Advani said India's battle against terrorism had entered "a decisive phase" following last month's attack on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi has blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups.

"This must be understood by the world community, especially by the democratic nations," Advani said.

In the wake of the parliament attack, India and Pakistan have massed troops on their border amid Indian demands that Islamabad shut down all "anti-India" militant groups operating from its territory.



Landmine blast kills 4 soldiers in Manipur

AFP, Guwahati

At least four paramilitary soldiers were killed and five critically wounded in a powerful landmine explosion in India's restive north-eastern state of Manipur, officials said Tuesday.

A police spokesman said militants of the outlawed Kanglei Yawol Konna Lup (KYKL) led by factional leader Oken ambushed a convoy of the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB) on Monday near the village of Umathel, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) southeast of Manipur's capital Imphal.

"The KYKL militants hiding atop a hillock triggered off the powerful remote-controlled landmine killing four soldiers and seriously injuring five more," Manipur police chief A.A. Siddiqui told AFP by telephone from Imphal.

Baby daughter of British finance minister dies

AFP, London

The baby daughter of British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown died Monday at the age of only 10 days after suffering a brain haemorrhage, the hospital treating her in Scotland announced.

"At 5:20 pm (1720 GMT) today, Jennifer Jane died peacefully in her parents' arms," a statement from the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary said.

The infant was born seven weeks prematurely at the end of last month.

She was delivered by Caesarean section, weighing only 920 grammes (two pounds four ounces), after ultrasound tests showed she was suffering problems that had led to irregular heartbeat in the womb.

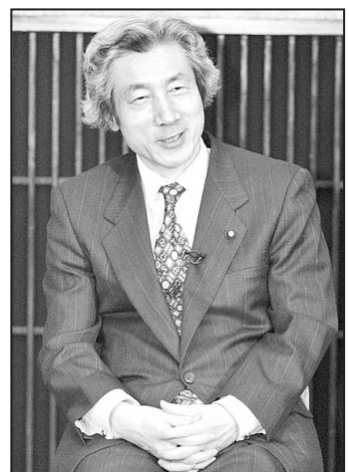


PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi answers a question during a meeting with the foreign press at his official residence in Tokyo Tuesday. Koizumi will leave for a week long tour of five South Asian countries on Wednesday which will take him to the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore.

US to raise possibility of resuming N-tests

AFP, Washington

The US government plans to raise the possibility that it might resume underground nuclear testing to help maintain the safety and reliability of its strategic nuclear arsenal. The Washington Post reported Tuesday.

The idea is expected to be raised Tuesday when the administration of President George W. Bush lays out its broad strategic nuclear plans to Congress, the report said.

The highly-classified Nuclear Posture Review will contain the administration's justification for reducing strategic warheads over the next decade from roughly 6,000 to the level of 1,700 to 2,100, as proposed by Bush, the paper reported.

But the review will say the United States needs to be able to resume testing at its Nevada test site quicker than is possible under present government guidelines, The Post reported, citing Energy Department sources.

"They do not want to say they are going to resume testing," the daily quotes one Energy Department official as saying. "They want the option to do so if they think they need it."

Former president George Bush, the current US president's father, imposed a moratorium on underground nuclear testing in 1992, which has been upheld ever since

US to press for keeping UN sanctions on Taliban

AFP, Washington

The United States said Monday it would press for UN sanctions to remain on the remnants of Afghanistan's former ruling Taliban when they come up for review later this month.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that even though the Taliban were no longer in power and the leadership of suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network was on the run, Washington believed the sanctions should stay in place.

"We will urge that sanctions remain on any remnants of Taliban

and al-Qaida," Boucher told reporters.

The restrictions -- which include a ban on Taliban offices and a freeze on Taliban and al-Qaida assets, as well as a flight ban on Afghanistan's Ariana Airlines -- are set to expire on January 19 unless the UN Security Council extends or revises them. Boucher said the United States would like to see the sanctions modified to recognise that the Taliban are out of power and that a new interim government backed by the United Nations is in control in Kabul.

"We would expect the council to consider a new resolution that reflects changes in the situation,"

he said.

"We would expect the Security Council to continue to update the sanctions and for the sanctions committee to update implementation of the sanctions as well."

The sanctions were imposed in January 2001 after having been adopted by the Security Council a month earlier in an effort to force the Taliban to hand over bin Laden and end its support for al-Qaida.

At the time, Washington had accused bin Laden of masterminding several attacks on US interests abroad, notably the 1998 bombings of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed more than 220 people.

Fire threatens homes in Australian tourist belt

AFP, Sydney

A wall of fire stretching 45 kilometers (28 miles) from an Australian national park to a state forest Tuesday threatened homes on the south coast of New South Wales with high winds fanning flames.

"I have never seen anything like it. It was unbelievable. It was a massive fire coming from behind us here and crossing the ridge in front of us," one firefighter said of the blaze which escalated Monday night.

Three giant flying helitankers were Tuesday dumping 9,000-litre loads of water on the Shoalhaven inferno, at times flying blind through the smoke to save property.

But residents faced another uncertain night waiting to be forced to flee their homes at an hour's notice if the front, extending from the Morton National Park to the McDonald State Forest and west to the Princes Highway, shifted again.

Since heavy rains on Monday extinguished bushfires in other areas, firefighters have concentrated on the blazes still burning in the coastal Shoalhaven region.

"The helitankers will be trying to extinguish the fires that have been burning there for the last week and a half," Rural Fire Service spokesman Cameron Wade said.

Peres offers India help to counter terrorism

AFP, New Delhi

Israel is willing to offer India all possible support in its battle against terrorism, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Tuesday following talks with senior Indian leaders here.

Israel is ready "in every way we can to help and support India" said Peres, whose three-day visit came amid a tense military stand-off between India and Pakistan over the activities of militant groups based in the Islamic state.

Peres met Tuesday with Defence Minister George Fernandes and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, prior to a meeting with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Defence officials said the meeting with Fernandes focused on

defence cooperation, as well as the general international security situation.

In December, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported that the US administration had given the green light in principle for the sale of Israeli Falcon radar planes to India.

The report said the contract involved three advance-warning radar-equipped planes and a Russian transport Ilyushin-76 plane with an ultra-sophisticated AWACS warning system, costing some 250 million dollars.

India is also considering the purchase of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from Israel.

India, which treated Israel as a pariah state for decades, established diplomatic links with the Jewish state in 1992.

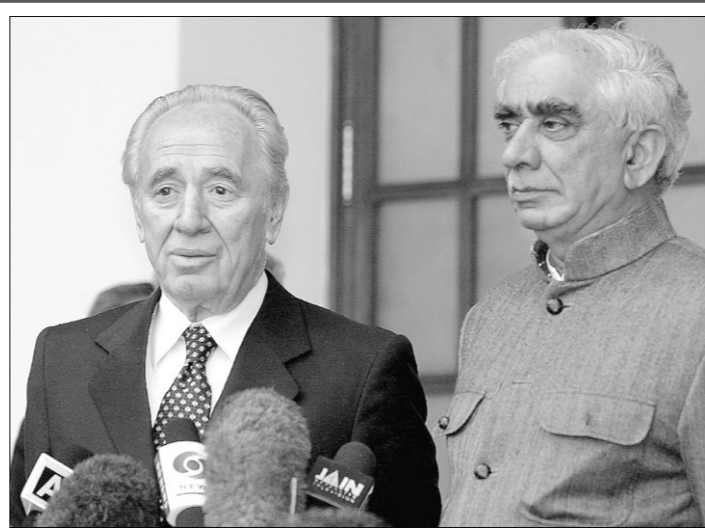


PHOTO: AFP

Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (L) speaks at a press conference with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh after a meeting in New Delhi on Tuesday. Peres said that Tel Aviv fully supported New Delhi's claim for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council and that New Delhi should be included in NATO as it sided with the US and Europe in the war against terrorism.

Prince Charles to be a model of Vogue

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Charles is to appear in one of the world's best known fashion magazines, Vogue, St. James's Palace said late Monday.

Pictured relaxing at his home in Highgrove, Gloucestershire (west England), the photographs of the prince are to be published in Vogue magazine later this week.

The photographs were taken by renowned Peruvian fashion photographer Mario Testino, who has worked with some of the world's most beautiful women including Elizabeth Hurley, Kate Moss and Diana, Princess of Wales.

A spokeswoman for St. James's Palace confirmed four pictures of the Prince would appear in Vogue when it is published on Friday.

Vajpayee promises to look into demands of NRIs

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced a string of measures on Tuesday aimed at meeting some of the long-standing demands of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs).

Accepting a report by a high-powered committee to study the problems and requirements of the Indian diaspora, Vajpayee announced the government would observe January 9 each year as "NRI day."

"Every year, we will observe NRI day to strengthen our bonds with you," the prime minister said, addressing a gathering of Indian citizens who live overseas.

"We will also award 10 outstanding NRIs each year for their contributions in various fields," Vajpayee said.

The prime minister also said the government was considering the long-pending demand of "dual

citizenship."

"There were some difficulties on this but they are now being looked into," he said.

Vajpayee said an earlier scheme of issuing identity cards to all Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) was nearing completion and would be implemented soon.

The prime minister also promised speedy implementation of the recommendations of the committee, which was set up by the Indian foreign ministry.

Apart from pressing strongly for "dual citizenship," the panel has also recommended a special team to look into complaints of abuse of Indian women married to NRIs as well as PIOs.

It has also sought a welfare fund for repatriated overseas workers, adoption of the British Council and Alliance Francaise models for showcasing Indian culture abroad, and the setting up of special economic zones exclusively for NRIs.

Tigers seek Indian role in Oslo-backed peace talks

Lanka may reopen key highway

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels are seeking greater Indian involvement in the Norwegian-backed peace initiative to open talks aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed in the island, a press report here said Tuesday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wanted India as an observer in possible peace talks, The Hindu newspaper said. India has banned the LTTE since the group was held responsible for the 1991 slaying of opposition leader Rajiv Gandhi.

Despite the ban, the LTTE wants the Indian government to extend its "good offices" and allow the talks to be conducted in a southern Indian city such as Madras or Bangalore.

"Though the LTTE does not welcome any country that has banned it, including India, to be a direct third party intermediary on the grounds of being perceived as partial, it is amenable to Indian observers if India hosts the talks," the Madras-based newspaper said.

Tigers have been outlawed by the US, Britain, Canada and Australia. Sri Lanka banned the group in 1998 after the Tigers were blamed for the suicide bombing

of Buddhism's holiest shrine in Sri Lanka's central town of Kandy.

The Hindu quoted its "Tamil sources in Europe" as saying the LTTE's London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, was keen to move to Madras which is only a few minutes of flying from Sri Lanka.

The paper said Balasingham, 63, wanted to travel to LTTE bases in the north of the island and regularly be in contact with the elusive Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran believed to be in Sri Lanka. It could not be done from Europe, the report said.

Meanwhile, a key highway between the Sri Lankan capital and the main northern city of Jaffna closed over a decade ago may be reopened after the easing of an economic embargo on rebel-held areas, a government minister said Tuesday.

The lifting of the embargo, which was announced last week, was designed to promote a peace process with Tamil Tiger separatists who are fighting for an independent homeland in the north and east of the island.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are currently observing a one-month ceasefire, which has been reciprocated by the government.