

India, Pakistan on path to talks: US

AFP, New Delhi

US Secretary of State Colin Powell voiced optimism Friday that nuclear rivals India and Pakistan would find a way out of the crisis that has brought them to the brink of war, but said "further action" was needed to ease military tensions.

"I leave here very encouraged that we can find a solution to this troubling situation," Powell said in a joint press conference in New Delhi with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

"We exchanged a number of ideas of how we can move forward," he added.

India and Pakistan have massed 800,000 troops along their common border since last month's attack on the Indian parliament blamed by New Delhi on militants allegedly sponsored by Islamabad.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf announced in a speech Saturday a crackdown on Islamic extremism and banned five radical groups. Since then almost 2,000 alleged militants have been arrested.

But India insists further steps must be taken "on the ground" by Islamabad before a dialogue can begin and is also seeking the extradition of 20 wanted criminals allegedly sheltered by Pakistan.

Powell, who arrived here Thursday from Islamabad on the next stop of a South Asia peace mission, said he hoped

Musharraf would "examine all information and do what is the appropriate thing to do in the case of each one of those 20 individuals."

"I think we are on path that could lead to the restoration of dialogue... but it will take further action before we can really start walking down that path actively," Powell said.

"What we have to do is to be patient, remain committed to the diplomatic track and realise that this is a time of high tension when you have military forces in proximity to one another."

Singh said that while New Delhi welcomed Musharraf's speech, it still wanted to see implementation of his words "demonstrably and recognisably."

Referring to the list of 20, Singh said if action was taken by Islamabad then he was "very hopeful" that Indo-Pakistan relations could be restored to the state that existed before the parliament attack.

"It is not as if they (the 20) are hiding in caves in Karachi. They are all visible to the Pakistan establishment," Singh said.

Powell discussed the military face-off with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra in talks here Friday.

Powell proposed a three-stage process for resolving the crisis: a toning down of rhetoric, examination of tit-for-tat diplomatic sanctions imposed in recent weeks and finally a military de-escalation on the border.

"These were just suggestions of ways we can move forward without trying to get any agreement at this time, because agreements will come in due course as confidence is restored," Powell said.

"I think we are off to a pretty good start... let's see where this start takes us."

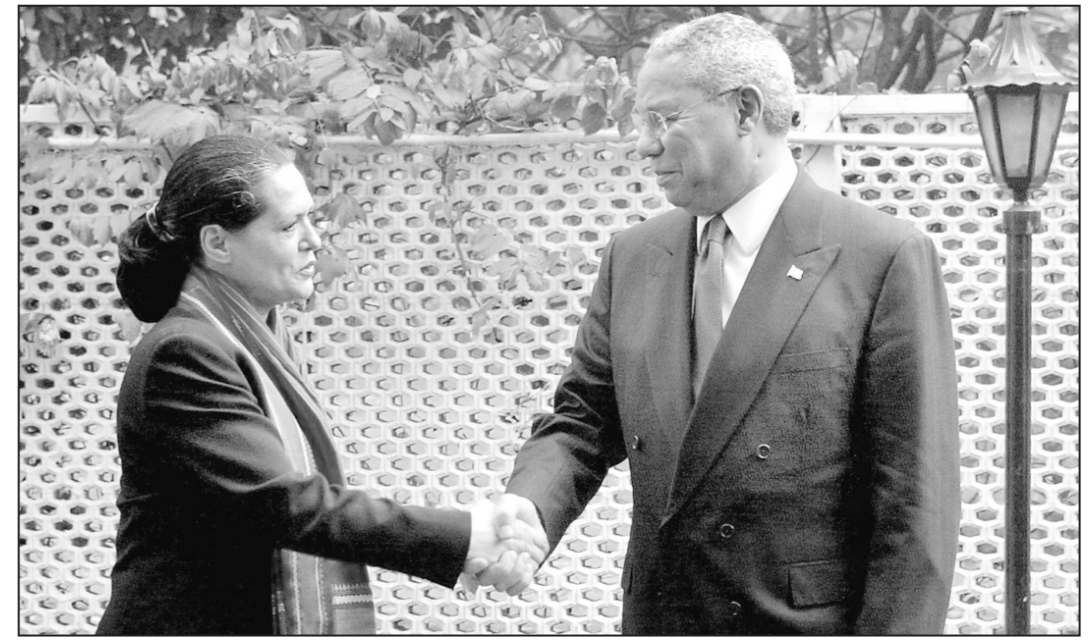
India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence in 1947, two of them over the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Both Powell and Singh condemned a bomb blast Thursday evening in a market in the Kashmiri winter capital, Jammu, which killed one civilian and was triggered barely one hour after the secretary of state flew into New Delhi.

"What has happened in Jammu is unacceptable. It is terrorist violence. It has nothing to do with any so-called freedom fight," Singh said.

India accuses Pakistan of training and arming militant groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir. Islamabad denies the charge, but extends open and moral support to the insurgency which has claimed at least 35,000 lives since 1989.

Powell said he would like to see an Indo-Pakistan dialogue resume "as soon as possible" but added it was "a judgement for the Indian government to make."



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) bids farewell to Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi following talks at her residence on Friday. Powell, on a whirlwind tour of South Asia, urged India and Pakistan to resume a dialogue, but said it was up to New Delhi to decide whether Islamabad had done enough to warrant a change in its no-talks policy.

US, India move to resume arms transfers

REUTERS, Washington

The United States and India on Thursday moved to resume arms sales between the world's two biggest democratic nations even as Washington pressed nuclear rivals India and Pakistan to ease tensions between them.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and visiting Defense Minister George Fernandes signed an agreement at the Pentagon under which their countries would protect technology secrets involved in any arms sales between them.

Fernandes held talks with Rumsfeld at the Pentagon after meeting US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice at the White House.

Musharraf warns India against aggression

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said Friday India could not sit in judgement on his efforts to rein in religious extremists and warned his armed forces remained ready for war.

Addressing a two-day conference of religious scholars from around the country, Musharraf said Pakistan answered only to itself and would not succumb to pressure from arch rival India.

"We have to show no action to anybody," he said in reference to New Delhi's demands that his landmark speech on Saturday, in which he outlawed five Islamic

extremist groups, be backed with action.

"We want peace. We do not want war, but if war is thrust upon us we are ready to defend our country with full force and might," he was quoted as saying by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan.

India has refused to pull back its forces from the border, despite Musharraf's weekend address in which the outlawed militant groups included two accused by New Delhi of being behind the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament that left 14 people dead.

That attack sparked a massive troop build-up and tit-for-tat sanctions between the South Asian

nuclear rivals.

"No one should be mistaken about the preparedness of our forces... Our forces have the power and the capability to not only defend but make matching response to any offensive move," Musharraf said.

Pakistan has initiated a sweeping crackdown which has already netted some 1,900 alleged religious extremists, but Indian officials have said there could be no de-escalation until all "cross-border terrorism" ceases.

India has also demanded Pakistan hand over 20 alleged terrorists, but Musharraf has bluntly refused to deliver any Pakistani nationals on the list.

Brute boy kills mother

AFP, New Delhi

A 17-year-old boy in New Delhi bludgeoned his mother to death with a hammer for continually pestering him to study, a report in The Hindustan Times newspaper said Friday.

According to the report, the boy, who recently failed an engineering test, was beaten by his 43-year-old mother Ranjana Chowdhary with a broom on Wednesday night after an argument.

She scolded him for not studying enough and spending too much time with his girlfriend.

On Thursday morning, the unidentified boy walked into the kitchen where his mother was working, and hit her on the head with a hammer. She later died from her injuries.

Karzai to visit US Jan 28

AFP, Washington

Interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai is to meet US President George W. Bush here January 28, the White House announced Thursday.

"This visit provides an opportunity to develop the US partnership with Afghanistan to eliminate terrorism and build a stable Afghanistan which will not again become a base for terrorist activity," the White House said in a statement.

"We look forward to an Afghanistan that is prosperous, accountable to its citizens, and at peace with its neighbours and the international community."

Powell in Nepal to show support for democracy

AFP, Kathmandu

US Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Nepal Friday to hold talks with the government about its fight against Maoist rebels it has branded terrorists.

"We are going to Nepal to show support for democracy, a democracy that is being attacked. We're going to talk to them about the cooperation that we have," a senior US official told reporters on Powell's flight from New Delhi to Kathmandu.

Nepal is fighting a Maoist rebellion which has left more than 2,300 people dead since it began in 1996.

In November the government declared emergency rule to combat renewed violence by the guerrillas after they broke a four-month ceasefire and backed out of peace talks.

The official said the US supported Nepal in its battle against the leftist rebels.

"We object because it's a Maoist guerrilla insurgency. We don't like Maoists. We don't like guerrillas and we don't like insurgencies," he quipped.

Amid tight security, Powell was greeted at Tribhuvan International Airport by Nepalese Finance

Minister Ram Sharan Mahat.

Later Friday Powell is expected to meet King Gyanendra, who took the throne in June after the massacre of 10 members of the royal family, including King Birendra.

He will also hold talks with Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba.

Powell, whose two-day visit comes after stops in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, will be the highest ranking US official to visit Nepal since vice president Spiro Agnew in 1971.

Anti-terror probe focus on British links to al-Qaida

AFP, London

A court appearance by the first alleged al-Qaida members to be charged in Britain with playing an active role in the network has highlighted a suspected web of British support for Osama bin Laden.

Newspapers Friday said a police anti-terrorist swoop, the biggest here since the September 11 attacks in the US which bin Laden is accused of masterminding, illustrated the extent of Islamic militants' activities in Britain.

An Algerian suspected to be one of bin Laden's senior lieutenants was ordered held in custody Thursday in England charged with "directing" al-Qaida.

A second Algerian was also remanded in custody by magistrates in Leicester, central England, charged with active membership of the organisation.

US sees long term presence in Uzbekistan

AFP, Tashkent

Visiting US Senate majority leader Tom Daschle was quoted here Friday as saying the US presence in Uzbekistan had a "long-term" rather than a temporary character -- comments certain to raise hackles in Russia.

"These are long-term relations," Uzbek officials quoted Daschle as saying in a reference to the new ties that Washington and Tashkent announced last November and which have seen up to 1,500 US troops stationed at a base in the south of the country.

US and Uzbek officials pledged

then to develop a "qualitatively new, long-term relationship" stemming from their unprecedented cooperation in the international coalition fighting the Taliban regime in the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

The US presence in Uzbekistan has "a long-term rather than a temporary character," Daschle was quoted as saying.

In recent weeks Russia has expressed growing concern about the inroads being made by the United States into the former Soviet Central Asian region, which Moscow regards as within its traditional sphere of influence.

China pledges cooperation with Arab world

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Jiang Zemin Friday pledged to deepen relations with Egypt and the Arab world, but cautioned of new problems in the post September 11 world, state press reported.

"After the September 11 incident, the international situation has become more complicated and unstable elements have increased," Jiang told Egyptian journalists ahead of a January 23-26 visit by President Hosni Mubarak.

"China, like the Arab nations, is

faced with many new issues and new challenges," he was quoted by Xinhua news service as saying.

"We need to increase our exchanges, increase understanding, strengthen consultations and cooperation and together safeguard regional and world peace, stability and development."

China had no intention of changing its longstanding policy of developing and improving relations with Egypt and other Arab nations and would continue to provide and seek sympathy and support from Arab nations on regional and interna-

tional issues, he said.

In a veiled reference to the growing unilateralism of the United States following the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Jiang also praised past cooperation with Egypt on opposing perceived Western domination.

"With the spirit and guidance of generations of leaders from both countries, we have established true friendship and good cooperation, no matter whether it is in the safeguarding of world peace and stability or opposing power politics," he said.

Kashmir put on alert

REUTERS, Jammu

Indian forces boosted security in the winter capital of rebellion-torn Jammu and Kashmir today after a bomb exploded killing a schoolboy.

Thursday's explosion in a crowded market in Jammu which wounded eight people was the first major suspected guerrilla attack in Indian-ruled Kashmir since Pakistan pledged to crack down on rebel groups operating from its soil.

"Patrolling has been increased in the city, we are also beefing up security in view of the Republic Day celebrations," a police officer said.

6 Arab terror suspects put under US custody

AFP, Sarajevo

Six Arab terrorist suspects detained in Sarajevo on suspicion of links to Osama bin Laden were put under US custody Friday, the US Army European command in Stuttgart, Germany said.

"Six Algerian nationals suspected of being terrorists and detained by the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina back in October were transferred today to United States authorities and transported to a secure location", the statement said.

7 die from bacterial infection in Tokyo

AFP, Tokyo

Seven patients died in the space of seven days earlier this month at a Tokyo hospital in a suspected in-house case of bacterial infection, officials said Friday.

Two male and five female patients died between January 10 through Wednesday in what officials suspect are cases of *Serratia* bacteria infection, officials said.

"We are studying the case to find out if all the affected patients were infected with the same strain of *Serratia* bacteria," said Osamu Wagatsuma, spokesman for the public health centre in western Tokyo, where the Ito Neurosurgical Hospital is located.



PHOTO: AFP

A boy walks by the lava from the erupting volcano of Mount Nyiragongo on the runway of Goma's airport on Friday. Tens of thousands of residents of Goma fled their homes on Thursday and vast areas of the town were set ablaze by lava flows from the volcano.

KSA may ask US Troops to leave

AFP, Washington

Saudi Arabia is increasingly uncomfortable with US military on its territory and may soon ask that they leave and devise a less conspicuous form of military cooperation, the Washington Post said Friday.

One reason for ending the US military's 11-year presence, an unnamed senior Saudi official told the daily, was that top Saudi rules believe the United States has "overstayed its welcome."

The Saudis want to appear self-reliant and not dependent on US military support, Saudi officials told the daily.

US presence has become a political liability in domestic policy and in the Arab world and Riyadh has become uncomfortable with its role in US efforts to contain Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, they added.

On this point, a US Defence Department official who worked closely with the Saudis said they want to hold the United States to the promise it made in 1990, before the

1991 Gulf War, that it would withdraw when the job was done.

The Saudis, the US official said, interpreted the end of the US military commitment to mean when Iraq was expelled from Kuwait, but US officials believe the job remains undone because Hussein is still in power in Baghdad.

The senior Saudi official made it clear the US military should continue in Saudi Arabia until the war in Afghanistan was over. Then, he added, other forms of less conspicuous military cooperation should be devised.

US officials said a military withdrawal from Saudi Arabia would complicate US-Saudi relations since it would appear to reward suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, who has called for all US troops to leave Saudi Arabia, his country of birth. Saudi officials stressed that nothing would be done precipitously and that Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz was sensitive to the need to avoid creating the impression that he was responding to pressure from bin Laden.

Bush now knows about Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

US President George W. Bush, who at the time of his election campaign could not name the president of Pakistan, now has Pervez Musharraf as a major partner in the international fight against terrorism and the US-led campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

During an interview when he was the Republican presidential candidate, Bush failed to answer several general knowledge questions, of which one was to name the head of Pakistan.

A year after his election, Bush and Musharraf are the best of

friends, telephoning each other regularly, meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York and planning a further meeting in the near future.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, in Islamabad this week for his second visit since taking office, issued an invitation from Bush for Musharraf to make an official visit to the United States soon.

But the face of friendship cannot hide several thorns in the relationship, such as the innumerable effigies of Bush and American flags burned in Pakistan during protests against Musharraf's assistance for

the United States in the campaign against Afghanistan.

In the same way, the US military presence in Pakistan, and the off-handedness shown at times by US soldiers who regard themselves as in a conquered country, irritated Pakistan military authorities anxious to avoid provoking a Muslim population close to Afghanistan.

Because, even if street protests were easily put down by security forces, many Pakistanis felt closer to their Afghan Muslim neighbours than the unfortunately dubbed "crusade" carried out by Washington.

UN ready to respond to Congo's volcano crisis

AFP, Nairobi

The UN food agency said Friday it was ready to respond if the erupting volcano in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) precipitates a humanitarian crisis.

"WFP is prepared to respond to any large scale food requirements," Brenda Barton, spokeswoman for the World Food Programme, told AFP in Nairobi.

Tens of thousands of residents of Goma, a city in the northeast of the DRC, who fled their homes for nearby Rwanda on Thursday as vast areas of the town were set ablaze by lava flows from an erupting volcano, started returning at dawn Friday, an AFP correspon-

dent in the town reported.

"The town is completely destroyed, everything must be started up from scratch," said one man who returned during the night to find out the state of his home.

Barton said WFP had food stocks in the western Rwandan town of Gisenyi and that trucks were also available to transport it to the affected areas if need arose.

Another 1,000 tonnes of food had been sent to Goma prior to the volcanic eruption, but it was not yet clear if it had been affected by the lava flow.

Other WFP food stocks were in warehouses in Kampala and in the Kenyan port city of Mombasa.

No US action against Abu Sayyaf before Apr: Manila

AFP, Manila

The Philippines on Friday dismissed the prospect of an imminent military blitz with the United States against Muslim rebels linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

April will be the earliest possible date for American special forces to participate in joint combat missions against the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas, presidential spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao told foreign media.

In comments that reflected concern over the scale of US intervention in the southern Philippine

stronghold of the Abu Sayyaf, Tiglao said a thorough evaluation would be made before a decision was taken on US participation in the assault.

"The agreement as of now does not envisage any American military personnel beyond the company level. (For such a move), there will have to be a political decision," Tiglao said.

Up to April, the American troops would help set up counter-terrorism training for Filipino soldiers, including the use of high-tech night weaponry, officials said.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld (L) and Indian Minister of Defence George Fernandes share a light moment on Thursday during a press conference at the Pentagon in Washington, DC.