

## Pakistan yet to act against militants, says India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said on Sunday Pakistan had not yet acted on its pledge to crack down on anti-Indian Islamic militants despite promises by President Pervez Musharraf a week ago.

Fernandes, in Washington to meet US defence officials, told Fox News-TV in an interview that New Delhi would stick to its decision not to withdraw troops from the frontline with Pakistan until Islamabad ends what India calls cross-border terrorism.

The statement came amid reports that troops of the nuclear foes exchanged small arms fire at a few places along their border and a ceasefire line disputed Kashmir region on Saturday night.

The exchange was described as "routine and nothing abnormal" by Jammu and Kashmir state officials.

Fernandes said in the interview, excerpts of which were aired on Indian news TV channels, that words were not enough.

"The mere words of crackdown doesn't take us anywhere. We are facing trans-border terrorism on a daily basis. Nothing has changed."

"He (Musharraf) made that speech on the 12th of this month but in terms of delivering there hasn't been anything."

Last week, Musharraf won some praise for a speech in which he con-

demned terrorism and banned five militant Muslim groups, including two blamed by India for an attack on its parliament.

Fernandes, seen as a hardline minister in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government, said he saw no purpose in calls for New Delhi to withdraw its troops and military equipment away from the tense Pakistan border.

"Because, we withdraw our troops, you continue to be where you are and you keep on the fire at one end. Secondly, you enable these terrorists from your territory even today to more into our territory," Fernandes said.

"Now what's the purpose of this kind of an argument?" Fernandes said Pakistan had also not acted on an Indian demand to hand over 20 most-wanted men New Delhi alleges are criminals and terrorists and are sheltered by Pakistan.

Pakistan has said it will not hand over any non-Pakistanis on the list. It has also come up with a list of its own most wanted criminals who it says have taken refuge in India and intends to ask New Delhi for action in return for cooperation on India's list.

Earlier AFP said, a war between India and Pakistan can be ruled out only if Islamabad completely rejects terrorism, Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani said in an interview published Sunday.



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) shakes hands with Japanese Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka (L) prior to start of their bilateral meeting at a hotel in Tokyo on Sunday. Powell is here to attend the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan starting Monday.

## Relatives seek release of Lanka POWs

AFP, Colombo

The relatives of Sri Lankan soldiers missing in action while fighting Tamil Tigers travelled to a rebel-held area Sunday seeking the release of prisoners held by the guerrillas, officials said.

E.P. Nanayakkara, the secretary of the Association of Relatives of Servicemen Missing in Action, said the mission was aimed at persuading the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers to exchange prisoners of war.

## Pakistan to execute Islamic militant for cops' murder

AFP, Multan

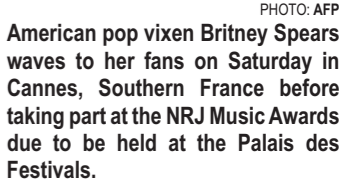
An activist from a banned radical Islamic group convicted of killing two policemen will be executed on Tuesday after Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf rejected his mercy petition, police said.

Shaukat Hayat, 38, gunned down two police constables at a checkpoint in Multan in central Pakistan in 1994 when they tried to stop him while he was riding a stolen motorbike, Multan jail Superintendent Mahmood Akbar told AFP Sunday.

Afghan government leader Hamid Karzai put Kabul's case for massive aid to rebuild his country shattered by 23 years of war in Riyadh on Saturday amid reports that Kabul was down to its last 10 million dollars.

Karzai's visit to Saudi Arabia was his first trip abroad since he assumed office on December 22 following the Taliban rout. He was accompanied by a delegation of eight ministers, including Abdullah. Karzai flew to Tokyo after talks here late Saturday.

The kingdom, one of Afghanistan's main bankrollers for years, has continued to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees since the October launch of the US-led war.



American pop vixen Britney Spears waves to her fans on Saturday in Cannes, Southern France before taking part at the NRJ Music Awards due to be held at the Palais des Festivals.

## US Marines' helicopter crashes in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Two US Marines were killed and five injured, two critically, when their helicopter crashed in a remote mountainous region of northern Afghanistan, US officials and reports said.

The CH-53-E helicopter crashed at about 7.30am (0300 GMT), 30 minutes after leaving Bagram air base to resupply US forces in the north of the country.

Marine officials at a US base in Kandahar confirmed in a statement that there were seven on board but their identities would not be released until next-of-kin were notified.

Two were killed, while two others were in a critical condition, two were serious and one suffered minor injuries, the BBC said on its website, quoting a Marine spokesman.

A US Marine spokesman in Kabul, Corporal Matthew Roberson, told AFP the cause of the crash was not immediately known.

"We don't know if it was caused by enemy fire or by mechanical failure," he said.

Another marine spokesman, Lieutenant James Jarvis, told the

BBC: "Right now, we don't have any indication of hostile fire."

"The crash is in mountainous terrain, high elevation. It is too early to tell the cause of the accident," he said.

Roberson said medical staff from Bagram, 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Kabul, were at the scene of the crash.

The helicopter was the second US aircraft to crash in the region in less than a fortnight.

On January 9, a US Marine KC-130 air refueling plane crashed into a mountain in southwestern Pakistan, killing all seven on board. It was the worst air disaster during the US campaign in Afghanistan, which started on October 7.

At least four other helicopters and another fixed wing aircraft have crashed during the campaign.

Two people were killed when a helicopter crashed in a sandstorm in Pakistan on October 9. The other helicopter crashes caused injuries but no deaths.

The CH-53-E is a twin-engine, heavy-duty transport helicopter, according to "Jane's All the World's Aircraft". It is capable of carrying up to 55 fully armed troops.

## Aid operation gathers steam for volcano crisis

AFP, Gisenyi

International aid workers stepped up efforts Sunday to help hundreds of thousands of people made homeless by the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo in the Democratic Republic of Congo, after the most violent tremor hit the area overnight.

Tremors continued Sunday as UN agencies and a host of non-governmental organisations provided food, water and shelter to some 300,000 residents of the eastern town of Goma.

They fled their homes on Thursday to the adjacent Rwandan town of Gisenyi when the volcano began erupting.

Another 100,000 or so residents remained in Goma, cut off from Rwanda until Sunday when a fragile bridge of hardened lava, which continued to emit an acrid smell, emerged in the town centre.

World Food Programme (WFP) spokesman Lara Melo told journalists her organisation on Saturday distributed 8.4 tonnes of high protein biscuits and that another 36 tonnes were on the way.

She said the United Nations and

other agencies would only be able to properly respond to the needs of the displaced if they moved to two "transit facilities" near Gisenyi.

Melo said there were 7,000 tonnes of oil and maize in Gisenyi "but at the moment we cannot distribute that because people do not have their cooking items."

Most of those who fled Goma did so with very few possessions.

"We hope that people will go into the camps, there is no way we can distribute food in Goma. With the volcano it is simply too dangerous," she said.

Thousands of those displaced were, meanwhile, heading back to Goma on foot and in cars and trucks.

A big question mark still hung over the dangers posed by Nyiragongo. A local volcanologist, Dieudonne Waffula, was unable until further studies were carried out, to say whether the earth tremors were seismic or tectonic in nature or whether they indicated another eruption was on the way.

More volcanologists working with the UN arrived in Goma on Sunday to make a more detailed assessment.

## NGOs start talks on Afghan reconstruction

### \$ 20 m Saudi grants for Afghanistan

AFP, Tokyo

A conference of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) got under way Sunday to finalise their report on priorities for Afghanistan on the eve of a major international conference aimed at raising funds to rebuild the war-ravaged country.

About 30 groups opened the talks at a central Tokyo hotel, the same venue as the ministerial conference, exploring ways to cooperate with donor nations and the interim Afghan government.

"I would like to explore how best the international community can help Afghan people to help themselves," Ishaq Nadi, co-chair of the NGO meeting and a professor at New York University, said at the meeting opened.

Afghan NGO delegates are reporting on NGOs' interaction with the interim authority and role of women, while topics of other presentations include aid coordination in Afghanistan.

"The priority for Afghan people are houses, shelter, food, health

education, and technical support," said Roohullah Roohlan Shabon, deputy country president of International Medical Corps, an American organisation based in Los Angeles and the second biggest NGO active in Afghanistan.

"People are dying of starvation, not having an education, women have been deprived of basic rights for years. Nothing has been done in Afghanistan until now," he told AFP.

A report from the NGO meeting will be submitted to the two-day ministerial meeting starting Monday to lift Afghanistan out of the rubble of war.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has given Afghanistan's interim government 20 million dollars in emergency aid, Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah said in comments published Sunday.

Riyadh would "give more financial assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan" at a donor conference which opens Monday in Tokyo, he told Al-Hayat newspaper in the Saudi capital.

Saudi Finance Minister Ibrahim Al-Assaf would lead the

oil-rich kingdom's delegation at the talks which will be co-chaired by Tokyo, Washington and Riyadh.

Al-Hayat also reported that Saudi Arabia had "decided to re-open its embassy in Kabul," which has been closed since diplomatic relations with the Taliban were cut after the September 11 terror attacks in the United States.

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The kingdom, one of Afghanistan's main bankrollers for years, has continued to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees since the October launch of the US-led war.



Muslims crowd at the departure hall to send-off their family members and relatives departing for Jeddah for the annual Hajj pilgrimage at the Singapore Changi International Airport on Sunday.

## 'Israel exploiting violence to destroy Palestinians'

AFP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is exploiting Palestinian attacks to destroy the Palestinian people, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said in an interview released Saturday.

"We have to take into consideration that the Israelis are looking to create friction between Palestinians," Arafat said in the interview with Newsweek magazine for the issue due out Monday.

"We are doing everything we can at the political and security level to exterminate this phenomenon of suicide operations. It's obvious that

Sharon finds in such operations a golden opportunity to damage the reputation of the Palestinian people, the Palestinian Authority, and to ... destroy the peace process."

Israel has escalated its campaign against Arafat's Palestinian Authority following a shooting spree by a gunman from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a radical offshoot of Arafat's Fatah group, which left six Israelis dead late Thursday in the northern city of Hadera.

The militant group said the Hadera attack was in retaliation for the death of one of its West Bank leaders, killed in an explosion the group blamed on Israel.

Arafat has been confined to

virtual house arrest at his West Bank offices in Ramallah since December 3, following a series of devastating suicide bombings by militants he had pledged to control.

Meanwhile, scattered violence swept the Palestinian territories overnight after a day of clashes focused on Ramallah, where Yasser Arafat's headquarters are circled by Israeli tanks, Israeli military sources said Sunday.

Heavy exchanges of fire rocked a northwestern district of Ramallah while shots were also fired at army positions near the neighbouring Jewish settlements of Psagot and Kiryat Sefer.

## UK plans evacuation of Britons from Zimbabwe

AFP, London

The British government is drawing up plans to airlift more than 25,000 British passport holders from its former colony Zimbabwe, where political violence and a clampdown against the opposition and media continues ahead of presidential elections, The Sunday Telegraph said.

The weekly said that Foreign Secretary Jack Straw last month ordered an emergency planning committee to finalise plans for a mass evacuation from the southern African country.

It comes after South Africa on Friday said it had drawn up similar plans, involving the army, to take in refugees from its neighbour if violence erupts in Zimbabwe around the elections set for March 9-10.

The Telegraph said the Foreign Office has evaluated that Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe is unlikely to relinquish power without a violent struggle.

## Malaysia detains 260 people in anti-drug raid

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur police have detained 260 people in a pre-dawn raid on two discotheques as part of a new sweep to rid the city of drugs, a report said Sunday.

The New Sunday Times said discotheques in Kuala Lumpur were being used once again as distribution centres for heroin and amphetamine-type stimulants such as ecstasy.

City police rounded up the 260 people at the two discos in six-hour long raids and seized amphetamine pills and heroin-laced cigarettes found strewn on the dance floor, the newspaper said.

## APHC unlikely to call for truce

AFP, Srinagar

The leader of the main separatist alliance in Indian Kashmir Sunday said it was unlikely to call for an immediate ceasefire in the region ravaged by 12 years of separatist insurgency.

In November Abdul Gani Bhat, chairman of All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) -- a conglomerate of 23 separatist political groups -- urged for India, Pakistan, the APHC and other parties to call a truce.

The appeal was spurned by both militant groups and the Indian government.

However, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's pledge last week to crackdown on extremists, including those active in Kashmir, had rekindled hopes that the APHC would call for a fresh ceasefire.

Ten people, seven of them Muslim militants, were killed in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight and Sunday, a police spokesman said.

Three separatist Muslim militants and an Indian army soldier were killed in a fierce gunbattle in the northern Kashmir district of Kupwara overnight, he said.

The fighting broke out when Indian army troops ringed a suspected hideout in the snow-enveloped Kandi area. Militants opened fire at the raiding troops killing a soldier, police said.

"Soldiers returned the fire killing all the three militants hiding inside the hideout," the spokesman said.

Another militant was shot dead in neighbouring Dodipora village of the same district, which borders Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

## Delhi under tight security as Republic Day approaches

AFP, New Delhi

Security in New Delhi was at an all-time high in the runup to India's 52nd Republic Day celebrations later this week following intelligence reports that Islamic militant groups were planning attacks during the annual parade, police said Sunday.

City police have been on heightened alert since a suicide attack on India's high-security parliament complex last month.

Fourteen people were killed in the attack which New Delhi has blamed on two Pakistan-based Islamic rebel groups battling Indian rule in Kashmir.

"We have received reports of several Islamic suicide squads entering the capital to target the

parade," a Delhi police official told AFP.

"So we have asked our men not to relax their guard," he added.

A report in the Asian Age newspaper on Sunday said New Delhi police had received intelligence reports of a possible attempt by Muslim militants on the life of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee during the January 26 parade.

But the police official dismissed the report saying: "There were always reports warning of a possible attempt on the lives of VIPs, especially when so many of them are gathered in one place."

"This is nothing unusual, but then we are not taking the situation lightly either."

## Highway to Lanka's most sacred tree

AFP, Anuradhapura

Police lifted most of the road blocks in this north-central town and allowed Buddhist pilgrims freer access Sunday to what they believe to be the world's oldest and most sacred trees.

Barricades had been in place over a mile (1.5 kilometres) away from the Sri Maha Bodi, a ficus grown from a sapling from the tree in India that sheltered the Buddha when he attained enlightenment more than 2,500 years ago.

A top level meeting of monks and senior administration officials here decided last week to ease the road blocks but retain the tight security around the "Udamaluwa", or the inner sanctum of the holy tree.

The tree arguably has the tightest security in Sri Lanka -- it is surrounded by a gold-plated fence and protected round-the-clock, spiritually and physically, by an army of troopers as well as monks.

A group of seven monks conducts rituals day and night to give spiritual protection to the tree, while more than 1,000 soldiers and police armed with automatic assault rifles are deployed to prevent rebel attacks or sabotage.

"The local residents and monks wanted some of the barriers lifted because it was a great inconvenience for them," said local journalist Athula Bandara. "Despite the easing of the barricades, the Sri Maha Bodi is still well guarded."



Buddhist monk Ravaela Upatissa stands at the foot of the most sacred Sri Maha Bodi (L), a tree which is believed to be a sapling from the original tree that sheltered the Buddha when he attained enlightenment over 2500 years ago.