

Kolkata attack revives South Asian tension

REUTERS, New Delhi/Islamabad

An attack on a U.S. cultural center in Kolkata, which India has linked to Pakistan, has rekindled tension between the two nuclear-capable foes, just as both appeared ready to step back from the brink of war.

Close to a million men are massed on their border in a build-up fueled by Indian anger over a deadly attack on its parliament in New Delhi last month.

India blames Pakistan-based Islamic militants for that attack, and says that Pakistan's main intelligence agency could be linked indirectly to Tuesday's gun attack on the American Center in eastern India in which at least four policemen died.

Pakistan says the allegations are baseless.

India's Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani was unrelenting in his criticism of Pakistan Tuesday when he said there was no sign of a fundamental shift in Pakistan's support of guerrilla activity in Kashmir despite a crackdown on religious extremism.

"Our cynicism and skepticism about Pakistan runs so deep that nice sounding words are no longer enough. India has been bled by cross border terrorism for far too long," Advani, seen as a hard-liner in the government, told a conference.

Kashmir, over which India and Pakistan have fought two wars, is at the heart of the present stand-off and India wants its neighbor to shut down militant groups driving a rebellion in Indian Kashmir in which tens of thousands of people have died.

With key state elections in India just weeks away, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is under pressure to make sure

Pakistan keeps it word on curbing militancy.

India has consistently accused Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Pakistani army of training, financing and pushing guerrillas into Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state in mainly Hindu but secular India.

Advani said a group of kidnapers linked to the ISI had claimed responsibility for Tuesday's attack on the American Center. A senior leader of the group had telephoned Indian police from Dubai to claim responsibility, Advani said.

Police said four police guards were killed and 20 people wounded in the dawn attack by unidentified gunmen, which police said was targeted at U.S. interests in India. A U.S. embassy spokeswoman said a fifth policeman had also died.

With both sides trading near daily fire across their border, the latest attack comes just after a peace mission by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who left saying he was encouraged the two countries were ready to avert war.

It also comes after Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf announced sweeping measures earlier this month to stamp out Islamic militancy.

Musharraf banned five radical Islamic groups, including two Kashmiri separatist organizations blamed by India for the parliament attack, and denounced terrorism in all its forms. But he also voiced deep support for the Kashmiris' freedom struggle and said Pakistan's commitment to the cause was unchanged.

"What President Musharraf has said with regard to terrorism originating from Pakistan and aimed at Jammu and Kashmir seems tactical. It does not indicate any strategic shift of approach," Advani said.

The United States, which has repeatedly praised actions against militants by Musharraf, offered a different view.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told a news briefing Tuesday fewer Pakistan-based militants were crossing into India in divided Kashmir.

"I would say we've seen various kinds of reports that would indicate that there is a lessening of activity across the Line of Control," he said, referring to the cease-fire line between Indian and Pakistani controlled parts of Kashmir.

But Pakistan's top military spokesman Major-General Rashid Qureshi said tension remained high on the front lines.

"There is no lessening of tension at the working boundary, or at the Line of Control, or the international borders," he told a news briefing.

The political pressure on Vajpayee was illustrated by an opinion poll at the weekend that said the ruling National Democratic Alliance was unlikely to return to power in two states in provincial elections on February 14, including Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state.

Analysts say Vajpayee could be forced into early national elections if his Bharatiya Janata Party loses Uttar Pradesh, a crucial BJP power base.

Advani did not name the group which said it was behind the Calcutta attack but Indian External Affairs Ministry spokeswoman Nirupama Rao named the man who claimed responsibility as Dubai-based Farhan, alias Aftab Malik.

"This person Farhan is believed to be in close touch with some Pakistani agencies and could have tie-ups with Harkat-e-Jihad e-Islami and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen," she said, referring to two groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.



Commandos stand guard outside of the American Center in Kolkata on Tuesday after an early morning attack by unidentified gunmen. Four gunmen opened fire outside the American Centre in Calcutta, killing four policemen and injuring 20 people, in an attack which India swiftly sought to link to Pakistani intelligence services.

Pakistan seals Harkat office

AP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities Tuesday sealed off the main office of a major Islamic guerrilla group branded by the United States as a terrorist organization, police said.

Officers sealed the Islamabad headquarters of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen after sunset, police said. The office was empty except for a security guard who was not detained.

Police said a nationwide search was under way for the group's secretary-general, Fazle ur-Rehman Khalil.

Harkat-ul-Mujahideen was not included among five Islamic organizations banned by President Pervez Musharraf this month in an effort to ease tensions with India.

India accused two of the groups of staging the Dec. 13 attack on the Indian parliament building that left 14 people dead. The attack brought the two South Asian neighbors to the brink of war.

However, U.S. authorities have been urging moves against Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, or Movement of Holy Warriors, because of its links to Osama bin Laden.

Harkat members fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan and are also operating in Indian-controlled Kashmir, where they are fighting for an end to Indian rule.

'The Amber Spyglass' named Book of the Year

AP, London

"The Amber Spyglass," by Philip Pullman, a widely praised children's book that has won many adult readers, was named Whitebread Book of the Year on Tuesday.

The third part of a trilogy called "His Dark Materials," it is the first children's book to win the award.

"I'm absolutely thrilled to win this award because it shows what I have always believed that children's books belong with the rest in the general field, in the general market place for books and in the general conversation about books," said Pullman, 55.

TV broadcast journalist Jon Snow, chairman of the judging panel, said "The Amber Spyglass" was "in a league of its own" and "head and shoulders" above its rivals. "It's a remarkable moment when a children's book has swept the board," he said.

The Book of the Year is chosen from among winners of five categories: Novel, First Novel, Poetry, Biography and Children's Book. The award carries a 25,000-pound (dhs 35,750) prize.

Thai beauty queens banned from smoking

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's aspiring beauty queens have been banned from smoking and face disqualification from this year's Miss Universe pageant if caught sneaking a cigarette, organizers said yesterday.

Beauty, brains and a sparkling personality are no longer enough to win the pageant contestants must also be aware of the health risks of smoking, said organizer Surang Premree.

"Yes we have been asked by the foundation campaigning for non-smoking to specify non-smoking as one of the qualifications for all contestants," said Premree, from television station Channel 7.

Smokers would be screened out before than contest and they risked losing their title if found to have been smoking during the year they represent Thailand as Miss Universe or runner-ups, she said.

US rejects torture charges, Afghan govt faces factional strife

AFP, Kabul

The United States on Tuesday rejected charges it was torturing Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners as Afghanistan's interim government faced the challenge of disarming a war-weary country and ending factional fighting.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld angrily denied that prisoners transported from Afghanistan to a US naval base in Guantanamo, Cuba, were being ill-treated or subjected to torture.

"The treatment of the detainees in Guantanamo Bay is proper, it's humane, it's appropriate, and it is fully consistent with international conventions," Rumsfeld told a Pentagon news conference.

He defended the classification of the detainees as "unlawful combatants," rather than as prisoners of war with certain rights under the Geneva Convention.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said the fact that Washington has linked the prisoners to the September 11 terror attacks that killed more than 3,000 people should make no difference.

But Rumsfeld acknowledged Tuesday intelligence gathering has been given precedence over the swift administration of justice and he gave no indication how long the detainees would be held without charges.

High-profile detainee John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban, was on his way back to the United States Tuesday aboard a US military aircraft to face terrorism charges, US defense officials said.

Held since December aboard the US amphibious warship USS Bataan, the 20-year-old Muslim convert was being flown back to the United States to face charges of conspiring to kill US nationals

overseas and supporting al-Qaeda.

Walker had been held and interrogated about his involvement with al-Qaeda since appearing among al-Qaeda fighters after a bloody prison uprising at Mazar-i-Sharif.

Rumsfeld denied Walker was receiving different treatment from other prisoners.

In Afghanistan, officials played down reported clashes that threaten to jeopardize the nation's return to stability after international donor countries pledged four billion dollars in aid.

The urgency of the reconstruction effort was underlined Monday by reports of weekend skirmishing between factions that were once allies against the Taliban in northern Afghanistan.

An official from the Afghan defense ministry's foreign liaison department said fighting Sunday in Sar-e-Pul province lasted only 20 minutes.

Zabit Salih Mohammad Registani insisted there had been a local dispute between commanders that had been quickly resolved by a more senior officer in Mazar-i-Sharif, but said "some people" had died.

Amid the reports of looting and faction fighting, Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai warned at the donors conference in Tokyo that the cash promised by some 60 nations and 20 international organizations would have to arrive quickly.

"I also hope the pledges are made true in the coming days so we can take on the process of reconstruction," Karzai told the Japan National Press Club.

More pressure will be heaped on the shaky post-war settlement by the return of thousands, perhaps millions, of refugees who fled Afghanistan over 22 years of warfare.

American Taliban fighter headed to US to stand trial

AP, Washington

Two months after his capture in Afghanistan, John Walker Lindh began the journey back to the United States Tuesday to face charges he conspired to kill his countrymen.

A Californian who took up the cause of Islamic radicals, Lindh was airlifted off the Navy assault ship USS Bataan in the Arabian Sea, where he was being held, a defense official said on condition of anonymity.

Lindh made a stop at the U.S. military base in Kandahar, Afghanistan, before continuing on an airplane bound for the U.S. mainland, another U.S. official said on condition of anonymity.

Lindh was coming to the United States - not Guantanamo - because he is an American citizen.

A 20-year-old who converted to Islam four years ago, he is alleged to have trained at an al-Qaida camp in Afghanistan. He was captured in November in the siege of Kunduz and survived a prison uprising near Mazar-e-Sharif.

The conspiracy charge against him can carry a life sentence.

Also Tuesday, the Pentagon said another unmanned Predator spy plane crashed, at least the third U.S. drone lost in the anti-terror campaign started after the Sept. 11 attacks on America.

There was no indication the crash resulted from hostile fire, said Cmdr. Frank Merriman of U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Fla.

30 Pakistani, 10 Afghan Taliban to be put on trial

AFP, Kabul

About 30 Pakistani and 10 Afghan Taliban members captured in northeastern Afghanistan two months ago are to go on trial soon in Kabul, deputy intelligence chief Abdullah Jan Tawhidi said Tuesday.

They are among 300 Taliban fighters moved to Kabul last week from northern Kunduz, where they had surrendered or were captured by Northern Alliance forces, Tawhidi told AFP.

The majority of the Afghans will be freed under an amnesty granted to Taliban members who surrender and hand over their weapons.

"Most of them will be set free soon. Many are simple people who were just following their leaders. We have nothing against them," he said.

"However, we will put their leaders on trial - there are about 10 of them, maybe less."

All the Pakistanis, he added, "must go to court".

The court will decide what charges the prisoners will face but they could be up for murder, he added.

Kunduz was the last Taliban stronghold to fall in northern Afghanistan, taken by the Northern Alliance on November 26 after one of the bloodiest episodes of the war.

Tawhidi said six prisoners captured on the outskirts of Kabul on Friday were Taliban after it was initially believed they were members of the al-Qaeda network of suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.

"They changed their clothes and tried to hide the fact they were Taliban, but the police discovered the truth," he said.

Investigations were continuing into the activities of the six and their driver, but they were unlikely to be charged, he said.

The prisoners moved from Kunduz told AFP from their cells that they had been forced to join the Taliban and denied ever supporting the hardline militia.

Palestinians, Israelis warn of retaliation

Two women killed in shooting spree

AP, Jerusalem

Israel says it will respond to a shooting spree by a Palestinian gunman in downtown Jerusalem that killed two women, while the Islamic movement Hamas says it's ready for "all-out war" after four of its militants were killed in an Israeli commando raid in the West Bank.

A recent lull in the fighting has given way to an upsurge of violence, including two episodes Tuesday, and both sides were warning that they would take retaliatory action.

In the Jerusalem shooting, a Palestinian gunman opened fire at pedestrians and people waiting at a bus stop. Police patrolling nearby were quick to arrive at the scene and exchanged fire with the assailant, chasing him into a parking lot where he was shot dead, police said.

Sixteen people were hit by the gunman during the

shooting on a cold, rainy afternoon on busy Jaffa Street in west Jerusalem. Two women later died of their wounds, and another four people were seriously wounded in the shootout, police said, which lasted about 10 minutes.

"We are at war," proclaimed Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, who arrived at the scene to view the carnage shortly after the attack.

"This war is not taking place in some far-off battleground, but is happening here, at home, in shops, restaurants," Olmert told Israeli television.

In the aftermath of the attack, shopkeepers swept up the remain of shattered shopfront windows, and removed mannequins peppered with bullet holes. A puddle of blood stained the floor of a clothes shop, just a short distance from the site of a deadly suicide bombing attack on Dec 1. Former US President Bill Clinton visited the bombing site on Monday.

Nerve stem cell transplant wakes comatose patient

XINHUA, Zhengzhou

A comatose patient with cerebral paralysis in this capital of central China's Henan Province has regained consciousness after receiving an embryo nerve stem cell transplant.

The patient became unconscious with serious head injuries he suffered in a traffic accident last December.

But an operation to transplant 3.2 million purified embryo nerve stem cells into his body revived him.

Four days after the operation, the patient came round, and gradually recovered the strength of his limbs. He could also take food by himself, according to doctors.

Currently, the movement barriers of the patient have been removed completely.

US, Libya close to Lockerbie deal

REUTERS, Washington

The United States and Libya are close to a deal that could take Libya off Washington's list of terror sponsors, USA Today reported on Wednesday.

Citing senior U.S. officials, the newspaper said the deal would require Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's government to pay as much as \$6 billion in compensation for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103.

The paper quoted one official as saying Libya understood the need to accept responsibility for the bombing of the airliner. The London-to-New York flight blew up over Lockerbie, Scotland, on Dec. 21, 1988, killing 270 people, most of them Americans.

Libyan officials told the newspaper a final deal with Washington would not be struck until after the man convicted of placing a bomb on the airliner completes an appeal.

Abdel Basset al-Megrahi, a former Libyan secret agent was convicted last January at a special Scottish court at Camp Zeist, Netherlands. His appeal hearing, which lawyers estimate will last about three weeks, opens on Wednesday.

USA Today said President Bush would make the final decision on whether to remove Libya from the list of states that sponsor terror, including Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Syria. Libya has been on the list since 1979.

The State Department had no comment on the report.

Babies' sighs during sleep 'reset' nervous system

REUTERS, Rancho Mirage, California

Parents who hear their sleeping infants sigh from time to time should be reassured, not alarmed. Sighs are an indication of healthy sleep and sometimes serve as an important survival mechanism, Belgian researchers reported here Friday at a pediatric sleep meeting.

When a sleeping infant emits a sigh—defined in sleep researchers' terms as a breath with at least twice the amplitude of the preceding one—the sigh seems to reset the autonomic nervous system, which controls blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature and other important bodily functions, according to Dr. Sonia Scaillet of University Children's Hospital, Brussels, the study's lead author.

The autonomic nervous system has two components, which act in balance with one another. One component, the sympathetic ner-

vous system, takes over during stressful situations, for example when a person is running from danger. The other, the parasympathetic nervous system, takes control during less stressful times. A baby's sigh, the researchers found, acts like a "reset button" to rebalance the two systems.

The team analyzed 107 sighs isolated from sleep recordings of 23 full-term infants, whose median age was 33 weeks. They compared the 2-minute period before the sigh with the 2-minute period after. Before the sigh, the investigators found, babies' sympathetic activity was decreasing, while their parasympathetic activity was on the rise. After the sigh, the opposite took place: parasympathetic activity dropped, while sympathetic activity rose.

"The sigh is a healthy mechanism," said Dr. Patricia Franco, who presented the team's research at the 20th Annual Conference on Sleep Disorders in Infancy and Childhood. "If there is a

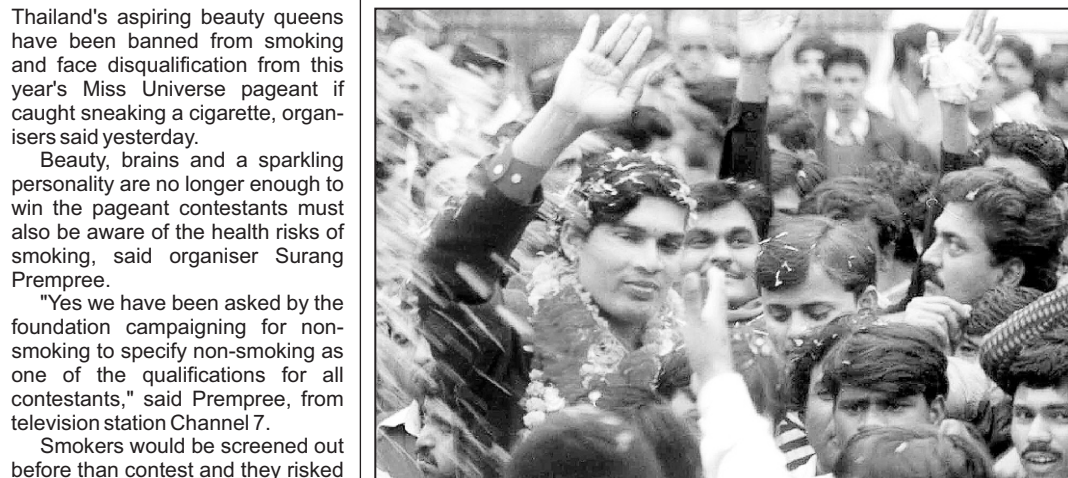
problem with breathing, the sigh can be important for oxygenation," she told Reuters Health.

Their finding "indicates that sighs could play a 'resetting' role for the autonomic system during quiet (deep) sleep in infants," the authors write in their conclusion.

"Some other groups have looked at sighs in relation to heart rate, lung function and arousal reactions," Scaillet told Reuters Health. "But to my knowledge, we are the first to study the relationship between sighs and the autonomic nervous system."

Recently, many sleep researchers have focused on arousal mechanisms such as sighs, Franco said, in efforts to learn more about pediatric sleep and sleep disorders, such as sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

But to say that an infant who sighs is minimizing his risk of SIDS is definitely a stretch, Scaillet added.



Eunuch Payal (L) waves to supporters yesterday while campaigning for the state assembly elections in Lucknow. Payal is running against the state's Urban Development Minister Lajji Tandon.