

India says no to reduction of troops on Pak border

Advani turns down Pak invitation

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes Saturday denied reports of troops reduction on the border with Pakistan, saying they would remain there until Islamabad complies with New Delhi's conditions for a withdrawal.

"There is no question of India withdrawing its troops from the border until the conditions are met by Islamabad," Fernandes was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India.

"India has not started withdrawing troops from the border. There is no truth in such reports," he said at a naval function.

A high ranking Pakistani intelligence source said on Friday that India had started withdrawing troops from the border and that the Air Force had been given "stand

down" instructions.

Meanwhile, Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani Saturday turned down a reported invitation to visit Pakistan, saying Islamabad should end "cross-border terrorism" before bilateral talks are resumed.

"I am grateful to them (Pakistan) for the invitation," Advani said at a police function in Ghaziabad city, according to the Press Trust of India.

"Experiences in the past few years have shown that there is no need for talks. They have to first prove at ground level that they want to end terrorism," he added.

According to newspapers, Advani was invited to visit Islamabad by Pakistan's Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider. He reportedly extended the formal invitation to Indian Information Minister Sushma Swaraj who was in Islamabad to attend a regional conference.

US, Canada to expand their 'smart border' programme

AFP, Washington

US and Canadian officials announced plans Friday to expand their "smart border" program to speed up crossing between the two countries to three more locations in the west.

The announcement came after a meeting here between US Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge and Deputy Canadian Prime Minister John Manley.

The three new entry points added to the program are on the border between the northwest US state of Washington and the Canadian province of British Columbia -- known as the Pacific Highway, Peace Arch, and Boundary Bay/Point Roberts crossings.

"This builds on the successful pilot project at the Sarnia (On-

tario)/Port Huron (Michigan)" crossing, the White House said in a statement.

The two countries in December announced plans to reduce the traffic snarls that had developed as a result of tighter security along their border following the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The 30-point program includes "smart cards" for low-risk frequent travellers to allow them to pass the border more quickly as well as a joint inspection system for freight.

The two countries planned to develop a system under which goods produced in one country and destined for the other could get customs clearance at the factory of the producer and then put in an electronically sealed truck that transmits the information to customs agents at the border crossing point.



Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe (R), flanked by security, casts his vote at a Harare polling station on the first day of two days of voting for the presidential elections while Zimbabweans wait in line to vote at a polling station in the Mbare shantytown of Harare. Zimbabweans started voting on Saturday in an election pitting President Robert Mugabe against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.



Indian Broadcasting Minister Sushma Swaraj (2nd-L) is greeted by Pakistani Information Minister Nisar Memon (R) to an official dinner for the South Asian Association for Regional cooperation (SAARC) Information Ministers in Islamabad on Friday.

Pearl kidnap mastermind Omar appears in court

AFP, Karachi

Sheikh Omar, the confessed mastermind of slain US reporter Daniel Pearl's abduction, Saturday appeared in court here under heavy police guard, witnesses said.

The militant was brought before the city magistrate here in an armoured car surrounded by police vans and dozens of armed police.

Omar's appearance was to allow the statement of a witness who identified him to be formally recorded before the court and to let his lawyer cross-examine the witness.

The British-born Islamic militant appeared in court Wednesday where he was identified by a taxi driver who said he saw Omar whisk Pearl away in a car from a restaurant on January 23.

Zahir Shah hopes his return will bring democracy, unity

AFP, London

The former king of Afghanistan, Mohammed Zahir Shah, said in a rare interview broadcast late Friday that he hopes his return home after 28 years in exile will bring democracy and unity to his country.

"The first thing I believe that I must do is to bring peace and comfort to my people," Zahir Shah told the BBC's Newsnight programme, ahead of his return to Kabul on March 21, in time for the Nowroz celebrations which mark the beginning of the Afghan new year.

"It is very important for me to try to bring a lasting unity to all the Afghan tribes," he said, adding: "But what I wish for now and what I wish tomorrow is democracy."

"My life in the past few years has been a struggle to bring democracy back. And I believe

that democracy is what we will see in the not too distant future."

He added: "I am aware this is not a job I can do single handedly. What I start others will finish."

The 87-year-old ex-monarch repeated that he did not intend winning back his royal status and would let the Afghan people decide whether he would be made king once more.

"I have not sought my kingdom back in the past and never will in the future, but we have put this decision into the hands of the people."

Zahir Shah has been living in exile in Rome since 1973 after being deposed by his cousin Mohammed Daoud.

He is remembered in his country for his progressive rule which ushered in a constitutional monarchy and the vote for women.

Grenade attack on polls rally in Lanka: 4 killed

AP, Colombo

A grenade exploded at an election rally of the governing United National Front near the Sri Lankan capital, killing at least four people and wounding 20 others, police and a party official said Saturday.

Sri Lanka goes to the polls March 20-25 to elect provincial councils. The election will also be a test of the popularity of the United National Front, which won the violence-plagued December 5 parliamentary

elections.

"Someone threw a grenade," said Rajitha Senarathne, the government minister for land reforms, of the incident late Friday. He said he was told by rally organisers that at least four people were killed in the attack.

A senior police official said another 20 were injured, three of them seriously. The officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said no arrests have been made. All the victims were supporters of the United National Front.

Naipaul, Rushdie clash over Gujarat riots

AFP, New Delhi

After ruffling the feathers of India's literati, Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul is now adding fuel to the raging debate over the revival of militant Hindu nationalism in the country, local press reported Saturday.

However, Naipaul's diatribe is being matched by a credible adversary -- Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie.

Naipaul was seen toying the radical fundamentalist Hinduism line in an address at a function of Hindu ideologues Friday, The Hindustan Times newspaper said.

"Indian intellectuals have a responsibility to the state and should start a debate on the Muslim psyche," Naipaul is reported to have told members of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS or National Volunteer Corps) -- a right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation.

"Muslims should not expect more tolerance than they show to others," he added.

The famed author also supported the RSS-led campaign to build a Hindu temple of their god Ram at the disputed site of a 16th-century mosque in north Indian town Ayodhya which was razed by thousands of Hindu zealots in 1992.

The destruction of the mosque led to the India's worst



ever Hindu-Muslim communal riots, killing nearly 2,000 people.

"In fact, Naipaul appeared shocked at the opposition to the Ayodhya temple, reckoning that Ram is central to India," the newspaper reported.

He is reported to have said: "The idea (of the temple) should be welcomed" at the function in his honour.

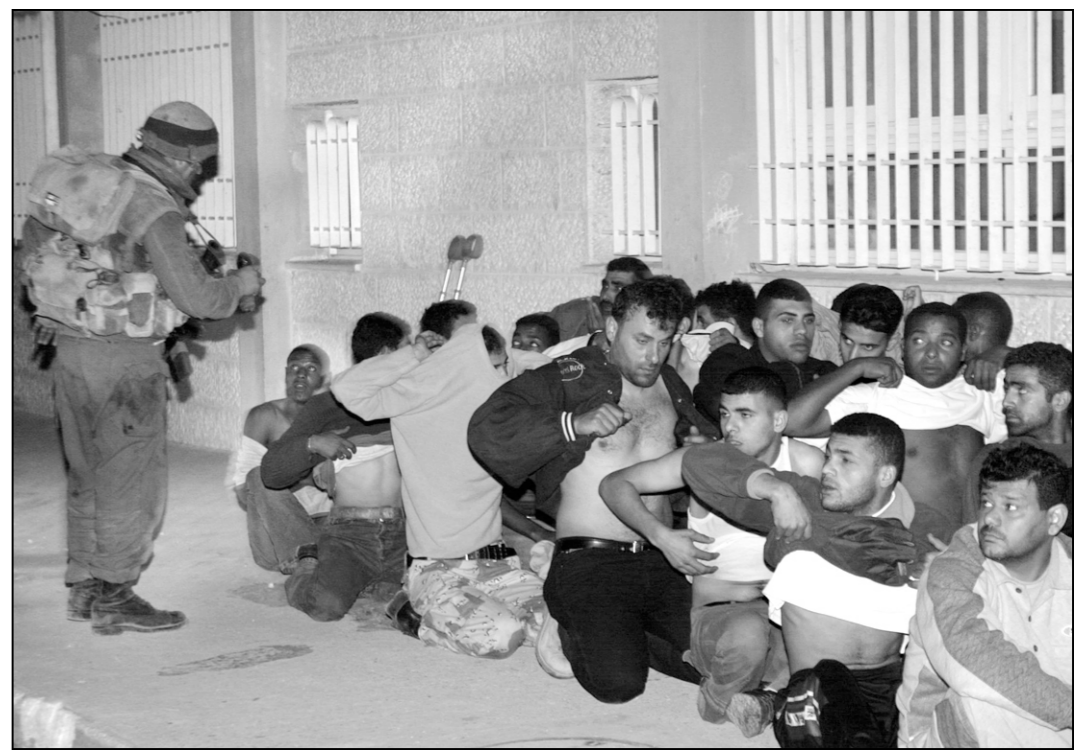
Meanwhile, Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie in a signed article in The Washington Post

slammed Naipaul for "disgracing the Nobel award" by making himself "a fellow traveller of fascism", The Indian Express newspaper reported.

In the article headlined "Slaughter in the Name of God", spun around the recent bout of Hindu-Muslim clashes in the western Indian state of Gujarat in which more than 650 people have died, Rushdie slammed Naipaul for "denouncing Muslims en masse and praising the nationalist movement" a week before the riots.

Blaming the Vishva Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Council, another Hindu radical outfit, and its "fascist agenda" for being behind the Gujarat riots, Rushdie termed religion as "poison in the blood".

Naipaul, the son of an Indian civil servant, has a reputation for being outspoken. At an author's retreat near New Delhi last month he reportedly shouted down an Indian author during a discussion on the impact of British Rule in India.



Arrested Palestinians are checked for weapons in the courtyard of a school in Tulkarem on Friday after surrendering to the Israeli army following a house-to-house sweep. Witnesses told AFP that the army had urged the fighters to surrender through loud speakers, as hundreds of soldiers with some 50 tanks and armoured vehicles re-occupied the northern West Bank town and its refugee camp. More than 20 Palestinians have been killed in the two-day operation, the town's mayor told AFP. Also one Israeli soldier was killed in the clashes.



Female anti-war protesters march towards the Ministry of Defence in central London on Friday as part of the 3rd Global Women's Strike on International Women's Day. The protesters were marching against the estimated \$900 billion a year expenditure on global military and against America's 'new war'.

3 rebels killed in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

A government soldier and three rebels have been killed in India's troubled northeastern state of Assam, officials said Saturday.

An army spokesman said heavily armed tribal guerrillas ambushed and killed a soldier on Friday near the village of Malugaon in eastern Assam, 560 km from Assam's capital of Guwahati.

"Militants of the outlawed Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) attacked an army column from a hill top killing one of our soldiers," the spokesman said.

Pre-Oscar dinner sickens 150

AFP, Los Angeles

About 150 of 550 invitees fell ill after a banquet honouring technical and scientific achievements as part of the upcoming Oscars awards, city health officials announced Friday.

The top technical contributors to film found themselves feverish, suffering diarrhoea and vomiting after being treated to a dinner last weekend by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which will award the Oscars on March 24.

Health authorities blamed either a gastrointestinal virus or a parasite that checked into the four-star Regent Beverly Wilshire, one of the most prestigious hotels in Los Angeles.

Muslim charity sues US govt

AFP, Washington

The largest Muslim charity in the United States has filed suit against the US government, saying Washington's move to freeze its assets was a violation of constitutional rights, the New York Times reported Saturday.

The group, the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, filed the suit in a Washington DC federal court Friday, challenging the government's move to label it a financier of terrorism, the daily reported.

The Bush administration has accused the foundation of raising money for Hamas, the Palestinian group that claims responsibility for suicide bombings in Israel.

In a 20-page civil complaint against the Departments of Justice, State and Treasury, the foundation charged that the Bush administra-

tion had violated its constitutional rights to religious freedom, among other liberties.

Last December, the Bush administration put the foundation on a list of groups and individuals that it said raised money for terrorist groups, a move that permitted the government to freeze millions of dollars of the foundation's property and other assets.

In its suit, the foundation asserts that the government's designation and seizure had "violated Holy Land's rights under the First, Fourth, and Fifth Amendments to the Constitution."

The foundation, which was started in 1989 and is based in Richardson, Texas, said that it "has never donated funds or provided services to Hamas, or any other designated 'foreign terrorist organization.'"

China rules out popular voting for parliament

AFP, Beijing

China on Saturday ruled out any extension of popular voting for its parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), for its 2003-2008 term.

Li Peng, the veteran communist leader who heads the current NPC, said deputies would continue to be elected from lower-level congresses, whose composition is controlled by the communist party.

Direct elections will only be allowed for town-level congresses, as is already the case, Li was quoted as telling deputies to this year's NPC by the official Xinhua news agency.

Even at the local level, the party maintains its control of the people's congresses by selecting most of the candidates, although there have been extremely rare examples of independent candidates getting elected.