

Iranian FM meets Vajpayee

AFP, New Delhi

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi held talks with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee here Tuesday, the second and final day of his official visit to India, officials said.

Government sources said the two men had in their 45 minute meeting discussed bilateral relations and the general security situation in the region, as well as the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

In Tehran, state radio reported that Kharazi was to make an unscheduled stopover in Pakistan for talks with President Pervez Musharraf later in the day, indicating that New Delhi's deteriorating relations with Islamabad had also been discussed in Tuesday's meeting.

PA sweeps Lankan local polls

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's ruling party swept to victory in local council elections and took the most prestigious district in the capital Colombo, results released Tuesday showed.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and its allies won all 17 municipal, urban and village councils that went to the polls Monday, the results showed.

The vote should have been held last month at the same time as other councils in the country but was delayed by legal snags. At the earlier election, the UNP won an unprecedented 225 out of the 230 councils that went to the polls.

The turnout Monday was 65 percent compared to 75 percent last month. Officials said there was less enthusiasm as the UNP was widely expected to win and the results were seen as a foregone conclusion.

Iranian FM to visit Pakistan

AFP, Tehran

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi is to make an unscheduled stopover in Pakistan for talks with President Pervez Musharraf later Tuesday following his official visit to India, state radio reported.

The radio said they would discuss the current tension between Pakistan and India, aid to Afghanistan and bilateral relations.

Tehran, which has good relations with Islamabad and New Delhi, while calling for self-determination for disputed Kashmir, has called on both to show restraint.

It condemned Tuesday's attack in Kashmir which killed 35 people and was blamed by India on Pakistan.

Iran and Pakistan both pledged at a UN-sponsored meeting in Tehran on Saturday to assist Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, and the subject also figured high on Kharazi's talks in New Delhi.

SE Asia renews commitment to wipe out terrorism

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asian security ministers Tuesday wrapped up a two-day meeting on terrorism with a renewed commitment to wipe out the scourge despite failing to agree on a common definition.

In a joint communique, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ministers said they "unequivocally condemn" acts of terrorism and underscored the "urgency for a cohesive and united approach."

In an endorsement of the Internal Security Act (ISA) used by Malaysia and Singapore to detain without trial dozens of local militants, they acknowledged the right of individual ASEAN countries to "continue pursuing practical preventive measures" to address root causes of terrorism.

Rebels kill 3 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels have killed a former policeman and two civilians, police said Tuesday.

The deaths took place in the eastern Sindhupalchowk district on Saturday.

"A gang of armed Maoists abducted a former policeman from his home in Khamare and then hacked him to death while two others were killed on Saturday in the same area," police said.

More than 4,000 people have been killed since the Maoists launched their armed struggle for a communist republic in 1996.

India mulls limited action in Azad Kashmir: Analyst

AFP, New Delhi

Indian troops have been given the green light for "limited punitive" action against targets inside Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, a leading defence analyst said Tuesday.

"All indications are that the armed forces have been given the go-ahead for limited punitive action against terrorist bases in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)," said Sridhar, a senior defence expert who recently retired from the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA).

Founded by an act of parliament, the IDSA is an influential defence strategy think tank.

"A limited military action looks inevitable but it has also been made clear to the forces that this is not a war against the Pakistan army but against terrorists in PoK," Sridhar told AFP.

Diplomats, however, believe India's leaders are still in a political rather than a military mindset and that much of the Indian war-mongering of the past week or so is aimed at pressuring Washington to put the squeeze on Pakistan to clamp down on religious militancy in Kashmir.

Washington on Monday urged the nuclear rivals to keep diplomatic channels open and confirmed Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage would soon visit South Asia.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, meanwhile, called on the rival powers to "exercise maximum restraint to avert a further escalation of tensions."

As part of the diplomatic flurry, US ambassador to India Robert Blackwill called on India's national security advisor Brajsh Mishra Monday evening to discuss the situation and reportedly asked India for "more time to restrain Pakistan."

French ambassador Bernard de Montferrand also called on Mishra, according to reports Tuesday.

Sridhar said while the Indian forces would "strike at a time and place of their choice," some targets had already been identified.

"The Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) have built huge 300-400 bed dormitories in and around Muzaffarabad in PoK," he said.

"If some of these structures are destroyed, the

message would be conveyed."

Both LeT and JeM are Pakistan-based militant outfits and are blamed by India for most attacks in Kashmir and elsewhere in the country.

The analyst said Pakistan was unlikely to retaliate and will only end up "increasing the intensity of shelling on the borders, abuse India and make noises at international fora."

Pakistan has already said it fears India is readying to attack "militant camps" in PoK.

Over the past few days, the government has taken a series of steps normally reserved for conflict scenarios. These include bringing the paramilitary forces in Kashmir under direct control of the army and similarly giving the navy the full command of the coast guards and merchant navy.

"This meets a key requirement of war-preparedness and this is a clear signal to Pakistan and the rest of the world that India means business," defence analyst Brahma Chellaney told the Hindustan Times.

Rodin sculpture recovered from WTC rubble disappears

AFP, New York

The bronze miniature of French sculptor Auguste Rodin's most famous sculpture, "The Thinker," which was recovered from the debris of the World Trade Towers, has disappeared, officials said Monday.

Fire Department spokesman Frank Gribbon and a spokesman for New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg told AFP that an internal investigation is underway to find the sculpture, owned by the Cantor-Fitzgerald brokerage house, which formerly occupied the 105th floor of the twin towers.

British police to aid fight against forced marriages

AFP, London

British police are to receive a new set of guidelines on how to aid victims of forced marriages, an issue that has provoked controversy in Britain, the government said Monday.

Foreign office minister Valerie Amos told a news conference the directives would be printed in a guide for victims of forced marriages, laying out their specific rights.

The guidelines are the result of more than a year's work between the police and some 300 non-governmental organisations representing or working with the various ethnic groups in Britain.

"The forced marriages' issue is delicate but with these guidelines, we hope to be helping young victims and certainly make them speak,"

Amos told AFP after the briefing.

But she stressed Britain was not against arranged marriages, but merely against those where both sides had not consented to a wedding.

Arranged marriages "are an important and valuable part of many cultural traditions, and involve the consent of both parties. In a forced marriage consent is missing, that is wrong."

Bernard Hogan-Howe, who chairs the Association of chief police officers, hailed the guide, saying it would "enable our staff to understand the issues and provide the most appropriate support and advice."

Under the new directives, police are no longer supposed to send victims of forced marriages away claiming they have no jurisdiction in the matter.

Laden received kidney transplant in Feb?

AP, Washington

US intelligence has received new reports that Osama bin Laden received a kidney transplant in late February, but it's unclear whether the reports are true, a defense official says.

Officials have received persistent reports that the leader of the al-Qaida terror network has severe kidney problems, but none has been verified to the satisfaction of US intelligence officials.

The defence official, while confirming the report, said Monday it is possible it represents old

information being reported again. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The latest reporting, believed to come from informants, again suggests that bin Laden received treatment with the help of dialysis machines supplied by Pakistan's intelligence agency. He may have received the surgery in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

In February, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf said he believed bin Laden had died of kidney failure. He later backed off, saying he didn't know whether bin Laden was alive or dead.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian army convoy leaves the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar on Tuesday in the direction of the northern Kashmir international border. Indian and Pakistani troops continued to exchange shells on each other along their Kashmir shared border, Indian government has taken a series of steps over the past few days normally reserved for conflict scenarios which include bringing paramilitary forces in Kashmir under direct control of the army.

US intervenes in Indo-Pak crisis

AFP, Washington

The United States Monday urged India and Pakistan to keep diplomatic channels open as the two nuclear rivals slipped closer to war, and confirmed Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage would soon visit South Asia.

Secretary of State Colin Powell - who mounted an initiative to cool tensions after a December attack on New Delhi's parliament blamed by India on Pakistan-based militants -- intervened again as political temperatures rose over the weekend.

Powell spoke to Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf in the latest of a series of calls, which have also included conversations with India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

"He's always looking for what the United States can do and how we

can help ease the tensions between them, and that's the context of the phone call," said Boucher.

"We have made clear what our strong concerns are about the potential for conflict between India and Pakistan."

"We think the surest way to lower tensions and resolve the disputes between the neighbours is through more dialogue between them, not less. That makes it important to keep their channels of direct communication open."

That appeared to be a reference to India's decision Saturday to order Pakistan's high commissioner (ambassador) out of the country. Boucher declined to make a direct criticism of the decision.

Boucher also confirmed Armitage would go to South Asia in the latest US bid to quell tensions in the near future, after saying Friday the Bush administration was considering sending a high-level envoy.

Armitage's visit was styled by a senior State Department official as a continuation of US efforts to still tensions which have been simmering since last year, rather a new peace shuttle.

Earlier, Pakistani officials in Islamabad said Armitage would be travel to the region during the first week of June. Boucher was unable to provide dates for the mission, but officials said early June would likely turn out to be right.

President George W. Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice meanwhile warned India to avoid war, but sweetened her remarks with praise for its fight against terrorism.

"We expect the Indian government to recognise that war will help no one here; that neither side, Pakistan nor India, is going to benefit from war," she said.

Indian troops quit riot-hit Gujarat to rush for border

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian army is being moved out of riot-affected cities in Gujarat and back to the western state's border with Pakistan, a defence ministry spokesman said Tuesday.

"It (the move) has no link with the present situation," said P.K. Bandopadhyay, referring to rising tensions between India and Pakistan.

"They are going back to the operational areas because they are no longer required for deployment in this state," said Kadri.

The Indian army had been called in to stem rioting in Ahmedabad, the commercial hub of Gujarat, and other major cities of the state where nearly 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, have died in communal violence since February.

The riots were triggered on February 27 after a mob believed to be Muslims torched a train carrying Hindu activists.

Mohsin Kadri, who runs the largest Muslim refugee camp in Ahmedabad, said the law and order situation had improved recently, but he was worried by New Delhi's "premature decision" to recall the army.

"We are still very traumatised by the terrible blood-letting between the two communities and are very insecure about living as minorities in this state," said Kadri.

"The wounds of the past three months have not healed and it is not advisable for the the soldiers to leave so early. We do not trust the local police as they were passive bystanders to our sufferings and now the main security job will revert

back to them."

Gujarat's police department was blamed for taking a partisan role in the riots which largely targeted Muslims.

But K. Chakravarty, Gujarat state director general of police, told AFP the pullout would not result in any further violence because the state had received back-up from paramilitary troops of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

"We have adequate paramilitary forces... recently some more CRPF companies arrived in Gujarat, so the withdrawal of soldiers will not really impact the internal security of the state," said Chakravarty.

"Moreover, the overall security in the state has been showing signs of improvement so any army pullout is not a matter of concern for us," he added.

Al-Qaida coordinated attack plan with Hezbollah, Hamas

AFP, Washington

Militants from al-Qaida met secretly with others from Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon in March in what US investigators feel could be an unprecedented effort to coordinate attacks against the United States and Britain, ABC News reported Monday.

The network, citing unnamed US officials, said the meeting marks the first time the three groups have been seen to work together. The

report said intelligence on the meeting had been passed to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Earlier, FBI director Robert Mueller said he fears that the suicide bombings that brought havoc to Israel could come to the United States.

"I think we will see that in the future, I think it's inevitable," Mueller said in response to a question after a speech to the National Association of District Attorneys meeting in Alexandria, Virginia.

"I wish I could be more optimistic."

Meanwhile, Washington remained on yellow alert for new attacks, amid reports of increased communications among al-Qaida cells around the world, which officials said could be an indication that preparations for a new terrorist attack against the United States could be under way.

Hamas has claimed responsibility for many of the bombings in Israel, and has promised more.

'Turmoil in ME root of global terrorism'

AFP, Tokyo

The turmoil in the Middle East is the root of global terrorism and a peace deal backed by multinational troops is the only way out, former US President Bill Clinton said Tuesday.

"The big threat today to the peace of the world that is stoking all this terrorism is this continuous violence in the Middle East," he said in a speech at the United Nations University in Tokyo.

An independent Palestinian state was the only solution to the bloodletting, said Clinton, who came tantalisingly close to brokering such a deal during his eight-year presidency.

"There has to be funds for relocation and for the compensation of refugees, there has to be a guarantee of Israel's acceptance in the neighbourhood as well as its security," he said.

"And there is going to have to be

some sort of multinational force there and the United States has got to be involved though we are a main target for those terrorist groups."

The failed peace talks at Camp David in July 2000 overseen by Clinton still provided a blueprint for an end to the bloodshed, the former president said.

"They are both (Israelis and Palestinians) tired of killing and dying and I think they are both kind of afraid of what is happening," he told an audience of scholars and officials.

But the international community had to win the trust of the Israelis who currently believe only America cares whether they live or die.

"I had them convinced they had to give up 97 percent of the West Bank and three percent of Israel to give 100 percent, because they knew that if their existence was at stake (from a new Palestinian state), I would get in a ditch and take up a gun," said Clinton.

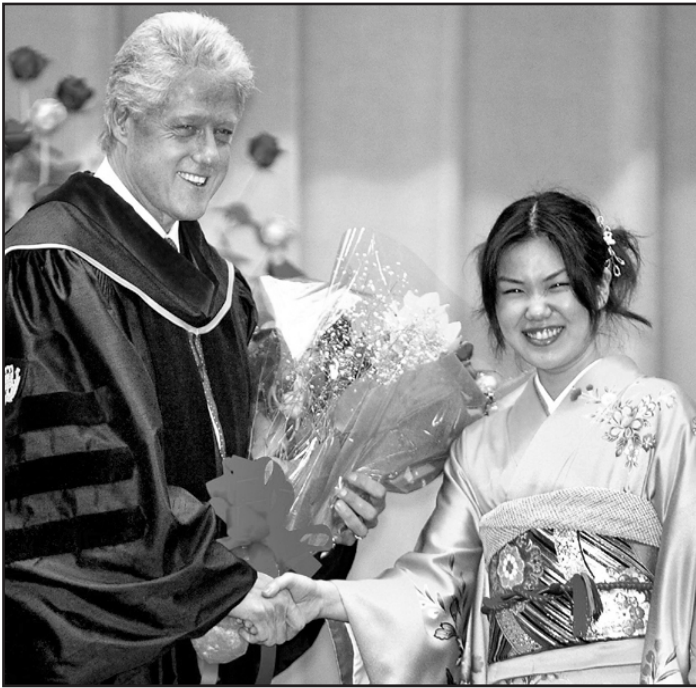


PHOTO: AFP

Former US president Bill Clinton (L) receives flowers from Nihon University student Miwako Ando dressed in a traditional kimono, after he received a Honorary Doctorate of Law Degree at the university in Tokyo on Tuesday.