

UK confirms plans for Kashmir monitoring force

AFP, London

Britain's Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon has confirmed plans for an international monitoring force to patrol the disputed line of control between Indian-controlled Kashmir and Pakistan, newspapers here reported Friday.

"There has been a general discussion on the need to find a practical way of giving both sides reassurance, particularly India because there have been some infiltrations across the line of control and an international monitoring force could be suitable," The Times quoted Hoon as saying.

Hoon said the plan had been put to India and Pakistan and he indicated that although Delhi was "not yet wholly persuaded" by the idea of such a force, it had not rejected the idea out of hand, reported the broadsheet.

EU, E Asia urge India, Pakistan to back off

AFP, Madrid

The European Union and its East Asian partners added their collective voice Friday to international appeals for India and Pakistan to back off from the threshold of war over Kashmir.

In a statement prepared for adoption at an ASEM (Asia-Europe) meeting of foreign ministers and senior officials, the two regions called on New Delhi and Islamabad "to take all necessary steps to defuse tension."

Both sides must "resume immediate dialogue (and) strengthen their cooperation to overcome the current crisis together," said a draft version of the statement distributed to journalists.

The foreign ministers also "called for an immediate end to all terrorist activities in the region," and "earnestly looked to Pakistan" to implement its commitment to counterterrorism.

Strike paralyses West Bengal

AFP, Kolkata

A day-long strike called by a member of India's ruling coalition paralysed life in the communist-governed West Bengal on Friday, officials said.

The strike was called to highlight the plight of farmers and poor people in the state, a supporter of the Trinamool Congress said.

"More than 250 picketers were arrested from different districts of the state when they tried to disrupt the movement of transport on the arterial roads and the national highways," West Bengal police chief Chayan Mukherjee said.

"Police have been posted at all vital government installations and strategic points to prevent any sabotage. No untoward incident has been reported as yet," he said.

Myanmar soldiers renew offensive on Thai border

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar troops launched a fresh offensive with heavy shelling Friday against ethnic Shan rebels along the Thai-Myanmar border, rebel sources said.

"Heavy long-range shelling from Myanmar and Wa troops has continued, but they have missed their targets," a source from the Shan State Army (SSA) told AFP by telephone from the scene of the fighting.

"We are still holding the seven bases that we seized earlier," he said, adding that some 3,000 to 4,000 Myanmar and Wa troops had been involved in the clashes with the SSA.

The SSA, an anti-Yangon ethnic militia, has been under heavy attack since Myanmar troops began their offensive earlier this week to retake border bases that Yangon said were overrun by the Shan last month.

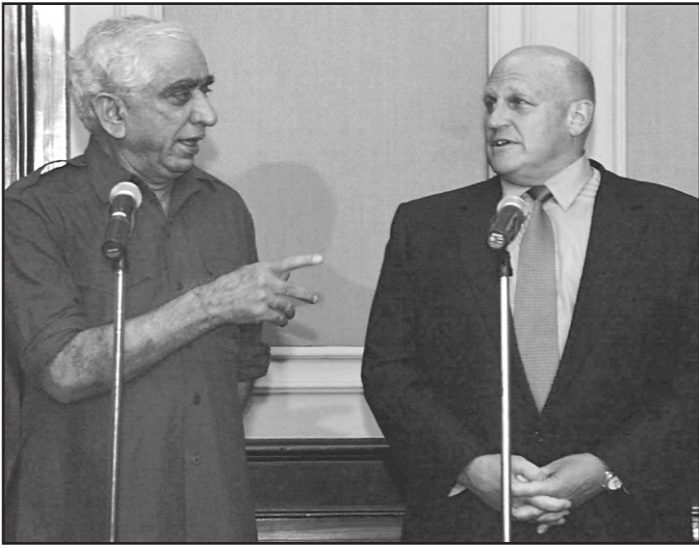
'Sept 11 heralds tough time for human rights'

AFP, London

Concerns over security in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks "rode roughshod" over the principles of human rights, UN rights chief Mary Robinson said in a lecture delivered here Thursday.

"In the past, the world has learned that emphasis on national order and security often involves curtailment of democracy and human rights. As a result, a shadow has been cast," she said.

"This shadow can be seen in official reactions that at times have seemed to subordinate the principles of human rights to ever more robust action in the war against terrorism."



Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh (L) gestures towards US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, following talks in a New Delhi hotel on Friday. Singh said there was "no alternative to peace", after holding talks with Armitage on the current tension on the India-Pakistan border.

Bush, Putin to push peace efforts

AP, Washington

President George W Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed Thursday in a telephone conversation that they should maintain their efforts to pull India and Pakistan back from the brink of war.

Putin had sought without success to mediate the conflict during a meeting earlier this week of Asian leaders in Kazakhstan. The leaders of India and Pakistan attended but did not hold direct talks.

Bush and Putin touched on the South Asian conflict during a 20-minute telephone conversation.

"President Bush and President Putin agreed to continue mutual efforts to de-escalate tensions between India and Pakistan," a White House statement said.

It said Bush praised Putin's efforts to defuse tensions in separate meetings with President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime

Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The State Department, meanwhile, said it was attempting to verify Pakistani fulfillment of a promise to stop all infiltration by Islamic militants into the Indian sector of Kashmir.

Once verification is received, the United States will seek reciprocal steps from the Indian side, department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

Meanwhile, a US Defense Department official said artillery duels between Indian and Pakistani forces had not abated.

He said some artillery positions on both sides of the Line of Control separating Indian and Pakistani Kashmir have been knocked out.

The official, asking not to be identified, said both Pakistani and Indian tanks are staying back from the border, suggesting heavy close

ground combat is not imminent.

He added, however, that air activity -- primarily helicopters, had picked up.

India has about 250,000 troops and 1,500 artillery pieces on its side of the line of control. Pakistan has about 180,000 troops and 600 guns. India also has more fighter aircraft and helicopters.

In Islamabad, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage met with Musharraf for nearly two hours.

"President Musharraf has made it very clear that he is searching for peace, that he won't be the one to initiate war," Armitage told reporters afterward.

Armitage said he would be looking for "the same type of assurance" when he travels Friday to New Delhi for talks with Vajpayee.

Once Armitage departs the region,

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld will hold follow-up talks in both countries.

Meanwhile, Japan's foreign ministry announced yesterday it was chartering a plane to help Japanese nationals leave India, with commercial flights packed because of tensions with Pakistan.

The number of seats on flights to Japan also shrunk as Japan Airlines said yesterday it was cancelling one of its two weekly round trip flights due to the tension between the nuclear-armed countries.

"Including that (the flight cancellation), seats bound for Japan are getting fewer so we have done this to secure a means to leave the country," said a ministry official in Tokyo.

The government Tuesday urged all Japanese tourists and residents in India and Pakistan, numbering 1,452 and 684 respectively, to leave the countries immediately unless they have exceptional circumstances.

Lanka lifting ban on LTTE Colombo seeks Indian support for peace

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government said Friday it had begun legal moves to lift a ban on the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ahead of crucial peace talks in Thailand.

"The government has begun the necessary legal procedures to lift the ban on the LTTE," Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris told reporters.

"The ban will be lifted about 10 days before the talks begin in Thailand," he said. The talks are scheduled for late June or early July.

The LTTE has said the government ban is the biggest hurdle to Sri Lanka's Norwegian-backed peace bid, which is aimed at ending three decades of fighting that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

LTTE supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran demanded at a rare press conference in April that the ban, which was introduced in 1998, be lifted before formal talks could begin with the government.

However, although the Tigers can look forward to returning to Sri Lankan life as a legal outfit, they are

still expected to be ostracised by many Western governments.

Before announcing its decision, the Sri Lankan government had sought and won assurances from the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada that removing the ban on the LTTE at home would not automatically lead them to lift their own designations of the Tigers as "terrorists".

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is also set to discuss the issue with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee during a five-day visit to India which starts on Saturday.

New Delhi outlawed the Tigers after the group was held responsible for the May 1991 assassination of former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Formal discussions between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government are due to take place late this month or early July at a naval facility in Thailand, official sources said Thursday.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe will leave on a five-day visit to India Saturday to drum up support for the

island's peace bid, officials said.

Wickremesinghe will start his visit with a stop at a shrine in the southern Indian city of Bangalore and then head to New Delhi on Monday, officials said Friday.

The premier is due to hold talks with his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee on the continuing peace efforts as well as on economic cooperation, a spokesman for his office said.

Colombo is set to lift a ban on Tamil Tiger rebels and start formal talks with them after Wickremesinghe returns from India.

The backing of regional power India for the peace process is considered important to the success of the Norwegian-backed peace bid, officials said.

Just before reviving the peace process, which had been started by the previous government but put on hold in June last year, Wickremesinghe travelled to New Delhi in December for talks with Vajpayee.

Diplomatic pressure yields results S Asian rivals offer ways to ease tension: Analysts

AFP, Jammu

A massive diplomatic initiative backed by the United States to defuse border tensions between India and Pakistan has started to yield results, with the nuclear-armed arch rivals offering ways to ease the stand-off, analysts said Friday.

Despite continued shelling over the disputed Kashmir border that Indian police say left dead three villagers Friday, both Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf seem to have toned down their headline positions.

"Till recently both India and Pakistan were adopting strong postures. Both were looking forward to this sort of pressure and it seems it is working now," said Renuka Choudhury, a professor of political science at Jammu university in Indian-administered Kashmir.

"For the first time positive signs are visible," Choudhury said. "International pressure on both the countries has reached its optimum level."

Vajpayee on Wednesday proposed setting up joint patrols with

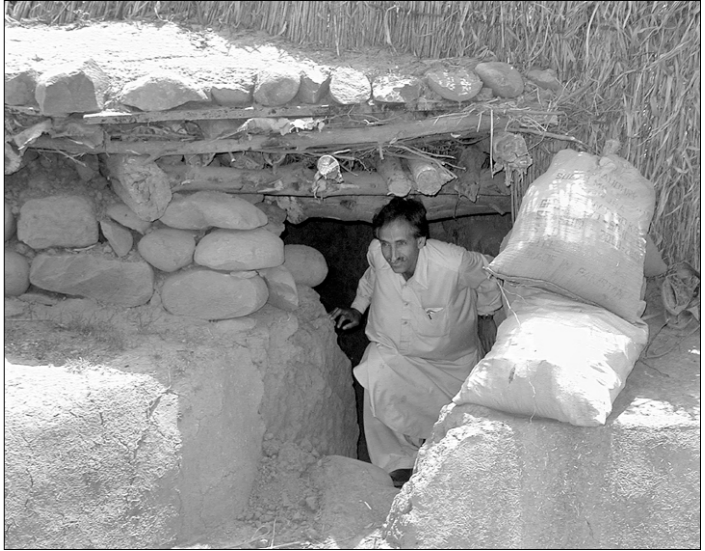
Pakistan along the disputed Kashmir border, while Musharraf told a visiting US diplomat the following day he wanted to avoid war.

"President Musharraf made it very clear that he is searching for peace and he would not be the one to initiate war," US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said in Islamabad Thursday.

Armitage, who arrived Friday in New Delhi, will be followed shortly by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld who will also try to cool the row over violence in disputed Kashmir that India charges is fomented by Pakistan.

India has demanded Pakistan put an end to its support for Kashmir rebels since a May 14 attack on an army base near Jammu that left dead 35 people, most of them civilians.

The two countries had already deployed one million troops on their frontiers after a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament also blamed by New Delhi on Pakistan-based militants.



A Kashmiri comes out from a trench at the Line of Control, de facto border between arch rivals India and Pakistan, near Hajira in Poonch district of Pakistan-administered Kashmir on Thursday. Six people, four of them children were killed on Thursday in heavy cross-border shelling by Indian forces on the Pakistani side of disputed Kashmir, pushing the death toll in two weeks of duels to 80.

C Asia talks security under shadow of Indo-Pak crisis

AFP, Saint Petersburg

The leaders of Russia, China and four Central Asian countries met in Saint Petersburg Friday to discuss regional security, with their minds focused on the Kashmir feud between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan.

Russian President Vladimir Putin held two hours of talks with his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin and others heads of countries in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the lavish 18th-century Petrodvorets palace outside Saint Petersburg.

Moscow and Beijing, the two most powerful members of the SCO, which also comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, have voiced alarm

at the escalating tension between New Delhi and Islamabad.

China expressed "deep concern" on the eve of the summit at the potential for a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, which is divided between the two and claimed by both.

"As the largest neighbor of both India and Pakistan, China is deeply concerned at the latest developments in the two countries," state-run Xinhua news agency quoted foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao as saying.

Russia, a long-time ally of India, has sought to mediate the conflict between South Asia's nuclear neighbors, with Putin using a regional summit in Kazakhstan earlier this week to launch an unsuc-

cessful peace initiative.

Although Putin held separate talks with both leaders, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ruled out any meeting with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, until there was an end to what New Delhi calls "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir.

A Russian foreign ministry spokesman said Friday that both Moscow and Beijing "want stability in the region" of South and Central Asia.

But speaking after talks late Thursday with Jiang, Putin also highlighted developing military and economic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, noting that the total trade turnover between China and Russia reached 1.7 billion dollars last year.

Hollywood star Harrelson held in London

AFP, London

Hollywood movie hardman Woody Harrelson was involved in a real-life police chase before being arrested for allegedly vandalising a London taxi in which he had been travelling, a newspaper here reported yesterday.

Driver Les Dartnell said Harrelson, the 40-year-old star of "Natural Born Killers" and "Indecent Proposal" smashed a door-lock and ashtray in the rear of his cab before jumping out, reported the Sun.

Dartnell watched as the actor hailed another taxi, before fleeing a second time when the vehicle was stopped by police.

"It was like something out of Hollywood," said Dartnell, who added that 14 officers and seven police vehicles were involved in the chase to catch Harrelson.

Plights of pyramids

AFP, Cairo

After more than 4,000 years of splendid isolation in the desert, the Great Pyramids of Giza are being encroached upon by housing development and by ever-increasing swarms of tourists, trailed by souvenir hawkers and would-be guides.

On the Giza plateau where the pyramids lie, buses discharge tourists from around the world every day, with crowds of Egyptians joining them on weekends and holidays.

The scene is chaotic, as tourists, arriving in private cars, taxis or buses, run into official and self-styled guides who offer them rides on camels and horses they lead around the site with a constant turnover of customers.

1b face risk of heart disease, strokes

AFP, Geneva

One billion people are overweight or obese, contributing to the 17 million deaths a year caused by heart disease or strokes, the World Health Federation warned on Thursday.

The worldwide federation of heart specialists -- which announced the launch of World Heart Day on September 29 -- said it had observed a twelve-fold increase in mortality for 25- to 35-year-olds.

"Research shows that the most common obesity-related conditions -- heart disease, diabetes-mellitus, high blood pressure and cholesterol -- contribute to these million of lives lost every year," the federation added in a statement.



Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan (R) called on Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien (L) in Ottawa recently during the last leg of his 3-nation tour of Botswana, USA and Canada. They discussed bilateral issues during the talks.

Bush seeks new anti-terror agency

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush urged lawmakers to create by 2003 a Cabinet-level agency with the "urgent mission" of thwarting terrorists like those who eluded US intelligence to wage the September 11 attacks.

"I ask the Congress to join me in creating a single permanent department with an overriding and urgent mission: securing the American homeland and protecting the American people," he said late Thursday in a televised prime-time speech.

Bush proposed establishing a Department of Homeland Security as lawmakers forged ahead with a high-profile probe into the CIA and FBI's mishandling of intelligence

tied to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"We need to know when warnings were missed or signs unheeded -- not to point the finger of blame, but to make sure we correct any problems, and prevent them from happening again," said the president.

"Based on everything I have seen, I do not believe anyone could have prevented the horror of September 11. Yet we now know that thousands of trained killers are plotting to attack us -- and this terrible knowledge requires us to act differently," he said in the 13-minute speech.

While the CIA and FBI -- both of which are making internal reforms -- would remain independent agencies, the new department would act

as a clearinghouse for information and develop a "daily picture" of terrorist threats at home.

"Analysts will be responsible for imagining the worst and planning to counter it," said Bush, who set out the broad missions of the new department:

- It will aim to keep terrorists and their weapons out of the United States while making travel more secure;
- It will work with state and local governments to enhance emergency preparedness and response;
- It will devise ways to thwart attacks with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons as well as treatments in the event of such a strike.

- It will protect the nation's infrastructure from terrorist attack.