

Indo-Pak FMs may have talks at SAARC meet in Nepal

AFP, New Delhi

The foreign ministers of India and Pakistan are due to attend a regional summit in Kathmandu later this month, providing them a possible opportunity to meet and resume stalled bilateral dialogue, sources said Monday.

The opportunity could arise on the sidelines of a meeting of the council of ministers of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the Nepalese capital on August 21 and 22.

The council of ministers comprises foreign ministers of the seven-nation regional grouping and meets twice a year.

Both Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha and Pakistani Deputy Foreign Minister Inamul Haq are expected to attend.

Indo-Pak troops exchange fire along Kashmir border

AFP, Srinagar

Indian and Pakistani troops Monday exchanged mortar and artillery fire in the disputed territory of Kashmir after a day's lull along the violent borders, police sources said.

The fresh exchanges were reported from the Uri, Gurez, Machil, Keran and Karna sectors of northern Kashmir and continued for several hours across the Line of Control (LoC) — the de facto border which divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

"Both sides also exchanged fire in Batalik, Hunderman and Drass sectors of Kargil," a police officer said, referring to the areas where the Indian army and Pakistan-backed forces fought a two-month battle in 1999 which left 1,000 dead.

Karzai, Fahim locked in power struggle

AFP, Washington

A power struggle between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Defence Minister Mohammed Fahim has escalated into a serious conflict, raising concerns about a violent split in the government, The Washington Post reported Monday.

So far, Karzai largely avoided antagonising Fahim, accommodating his demands and allowing him to control his units dominated by fellow ethnic Tajik militia fighters from northeastern Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley, the report said.

But since being elected president in June, Karzai has taken several unexpected steps to challenge the defence minister, which officials said have alarmed and infuriated Fahim, according to The Post.

Two weeks ago, Karzai ordered Fahim to drastically reduce the number of Panjshiris in the Defence Ministry and replace them with non-Tajiks, said the report, which quoted unnamed foreign diplomats and Afghan officials.

UK to face a flow of 2 million immigrants in next 10 years

AFP, London

More than two million immigrants will arrive in Britain over the next 10 years, according to a study by the independent research centre Migration Watch UK quoted Monday by the Daily Telegraph.

In 2000, the net influx was 183,000 people. Between 1985 and 1995 it came to around 50,000 people per year.

"The scale of inward migration is now so great as to be contrary to the best interests of every section of our community," said Sir Andrew Green, a former diplomat and chairman of Migration Watch UK.

5 killed in Texas shooting

AFP, Dallas

Five people, including three children, were shot dead and another person was wounded here late Sunday in what authorities see as one of the worst episodes of family violence, The Dallas Morning News reported.

The report said the tragedy occurred shortly before 6:15 pm (2315 GMT) at a private home in the Dallas neighbourhood of Oak Cliff.

The dead included three girls, apparently younger than 14, and an adult male and female, who were found in the kitchen and living room, according to the Morning News, which quoted local police officials.



PHOTO: AFP

People surround the A-bomb Dome and wave lights to pray for the victims of the 1945 atomic bombings at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima on Monday. The 57th annual memorial service for the estimated 140,000 victims killed in the bombing at Hiroshima, the first such bombing in history, will be held on August 6.

Flood toll goes up in S Asia

AFP, Guwahati

The death toll in floods ravaging parts of South Asia for more than a month continued to rise, even as water levels began to fall, officials said Monday.

In Nepal more than 300 people have died and scores of others been injured since monsoon rains brought floods last month.

The home ministry said 46 of the kingdom's 75 districts had been affected by floods since the monsoon began in mid-July. Eleven deaths were reported over the weekend in five districts.

"So far 309 people have died this year in the floodings and landslides triggered by the monsoon in the 46 district as of Sunday," a ministry official said.

Thousands of hectares (acres) of farmland have been inundated and 9,314 houses have been damaged, the ministry said.

In India's northeastern state of Assam, one of the worst hit areas, 41 people have drowned since July, while more than five million have been left homeless.

As the waters recede water-borne disease poses a new danger, and has claimed up to 130 lives in the state since floods began in July.

"Diseases like jaundice, diarrhoea, and encephalitis have been spreading very fast in various parts of eastern and western Assam," Assam's Health Minister Bhumidhar Barman said in the state capital Guwahati.

Pak parties seek approval to contest October polls

PPP to contest polls without Benazir

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's political parties on Monday began applying to the government for approval to contest national polls on October 10.

The Election Commission will determine whether the parties have met new electoral laws on party leaders and finances, before deciding whether they can contest the elections.

Under the laws all parties were required to hold fresh intra-party polls to elect party leaders by August 5, in order to qualify for registration to run in the national elections. They also must submit details of party finances.

The parties have to submit the results of their internal polls within 10 days of holding them.

Small religious parties were the first to arrive at the commission's offices Monday morning to submit their papers.

The submissions are a major test of ex-prime minister Benazir Bhutto's vow to run in the elections, in defiance of the laws brought in by President Pervez Musharraf.

The Pakistan People's Party re-

-elected Bhutto chairwoman in an internal ballot on July 28, despite Benazir's disqualification on two counts under the new restrictions.

PPP officials have until Wednesday to submit their internal election results, although a spokesman had said they planned to try to register on Monday.

As a two-time former prime minister Bhutto is barred from bidding for a third term in office, and as a twice-convicted absconder she is barred from leading a party and running for election.

Bhutto, 49, has declared she will return to Pakistan from four years in self-imposed exile to contest the polls, the first since Musharraf led a military takeover almost three years ago.

The Musharraf government has said Bhutto is welcome to return home, but police have said she would be arrested on arrival on account of her absconding convictions.

Both convictions were awarded this year when Bhutto refused to return from London and Dubai for separate corruption trials.

The PPP has said it may chal-

lenge the new election restrictions, introduced since late June, in court.

PPP officials said Sunday they would not back down on their decision to run with Bhutto as leader, despite the prospect of being denied registration for election.

"She has not been convicted in any corruption or criminal case," a PPP spokesman Nazir Dhoki said, adding that Bhutto was determined to return.

"She is not afraid of her arrest and there is no legal justification for her arrest."

Dhoki said Benazir's convictions for being absent from the court could not be a condition for rejection of the party's bid for registration.

"Her lawyer appeared on behalf of Bhutto, but the court did not allow it," he said.

The Daily Times newspaper quoted unnamed party sources saying that Bhutto may step aside and appoint a replacement to clear the party's way for registration.

The report was denied by her spokesman Farhatullah Babar.

"There is absolutely no such

move in the PPP and there is no such thought in the party," he said.

PPP's traditional rival, the Pakistan Muslim League, replaced its nine-year leader, exiled and deposed ex-premier Nawaz Sharif, with his younger brother, Shabbaz, on Saturday in order to overcome the new restrictions.

Meanwhile, the party of self-exiled former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto has formed a separate wing to contest October elections without her, party officials said Monday, placing Bhutto's promised political comeback in doubt.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has formed "a separate entity" called the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians which will run for election, the PPP announced after a hastily-called meeting of party executives.

The new wing will be led by Makhdoom Amin Fahim, previously the PPP's senior vice chairman.

But the PPP also said it would launch a legal challenge to a law passed on August 2 that bans absconders from holding party office or running for election.

Sharon fails to stem violence

US, Europe, UN call for peace

AFP, Jerusalem

After one of the most violent days in the region in weeks, the Middle East bloodshed deepened Monday with a young Jewish couple slain in an ambush and two Palestinians killed in a firefight.

Israel, struggling to control the killing with such controversial new measures as banishing militants' kin to Gaza and destroying their homes, responded by slapping a ban on drivers in five West Bank towns it controls.

The Palestinian onslaught, which left 14 people dead and more than 80 wounded Sunday, also sparked growing criticism of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whose headline tactics have failed to end the violence or renew the peace process.

There was no sign of the Palestinian attacks — which militant factions claim are revenge for the killing of Hamas military chief — abating on Tuesday, after four more deaths.

A Jewish settler couple in their twenties were shot dead by Palestinians while driving north of Ramallah when gunmen overtook their car and riddled it with bullets, Israeli military sources said.

Their two-year-old son was wounded.

To the north, in the village of Burka near Nablus, two Palestinians died in an exchange of fire with Israeli soldiers.

Haled Seif and Mohammad Farunieh died when the Israelis attacked a house in Burka. Four other Palestinians in the building were arrested by the troops, Palestinian officials said.

The onslaught was led by the radical Palestinian group Hamas, which said Sunday's suicide bombing on a northern Israeli bus was revenge for the Israeli air raid on Gaza City that killed its military chief and 14 others, nine of them children.

Israel's huge invasion of West Bank towns, cities and villages after a spate of back-to-back bombings on June 18 and 19 has failed to cut off the bombers, although Israeli troops destroyed several bomb factories in

Nablus, whose city centre was re-occupied at the weekend.

Instead, Israel is trying out controversial new tactics, involving banishing relatives of militants from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip and demolishing the family homes of bombers.

Two brothers of militants were to appear before a military tribunal for a third day Monday to appeal against their expulsion, while the army on Sunday ordered the sister of another attacker dumped in the southern territory.

As an additional measure, the army announced Monday it was banning Palestinians from driving in five West Bank cities and isolating a southern Gaza Strip town.

Meanwhile, the United States, the United Nations and Europe urged the Israelis and Palestinians to abandon bloodshed after a wave of violence Sunday which killed 14 people and injured at least 70.

"I'm distressed to hear about the latest suicide bombers in Israel," US President George W. Bush said after a member of the militant Palestinian group Hamas blew himself up on an Israeli bus near the northern Israeli town of Safad, killing nine people and leaving 50 wounded.

"There are a few killers who want to stop the peace process that we have started, and we must not let them," he said here in Maine, site of his family holiday home.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan issued a strongly worded statement condemning both the Palestinians and Israelis.

"Yet again... a Palestinian terrorist has needlessly and pointlessly destroyed at least 10 lives, including his own, while inflicting injuries on some 50 people and spreading fear and misery among hundreds of friends and relatives," the statement said.

"Every day, it seems, brings fresh news of death, destruction and suffering among innocent civilians, Israeli and Palestinian alike."

"One side resorts to indiscriminate terror, the other responds with retaliation that is equally devastating in effects on ordinary people," the statement said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian women and children look at the destroyed home of Hamas armed wing member Assem Rihan on Sunday in the village of Tel, near the West Bank town of Nablus. The Israeli army blew up nine houses in the West Bank belonging to families of Palestinians who carried out anti-Israeli attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Trinamul Congress supporters hold a placard depicting Trinamool Congress Party president Mamata Banerjee as they take part in a march in Kolkata on Monday. The supporters protested against the bifurcation of the Indian east-western railways.

Iraq urges UNSC to back disarmament move

Baghdad Invites US Congress to send mission

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's state-run media urged the Security Council on Monday to support Baghdad's initiative to kickstart talks with the UN disarmament chief on the resumption of inspections halted in December 1998.

"The United Nations and the Security Council must adopt a fair stance that lays bare the violations of international law, the UN charter and its resolutions by the United States and Britain," Al-Jumhuriya newspaper said.

Washington has "confiscated the rights and obligations of the Security Council by declaring in its name that it was not bothered by a dialogue" with Iraq, the daily said.

Ath-Thawra newspaper, mouth-

piece of the ruling Baath party, called on the Security Council to "treat the Iraqi initiative with the seriousness and interest it deserves to help bring about a fair settlement on all outstanding issues."

"The new Iraqi initiative is not a tactical move in the face of the evil American wind but an expression of the fairness of Iraq's stance and the importance it gives to dialogue," it said.

Describing the administration of US President George W. Bush as "barbaric and arrogant," Babel newspaper said Washington's reaction to the offer "has nothing to do with the United Nations and international law."

Reuters adds: Iraq's speaker of parliament invited the U.S. Congress Monday to send a mis-

sion of congressmen and arms experts to Baghdad to investigate American allegations that Iraq is developing weapons of mass destruction.

Speaker Saadoun Hammadi, in a letter to Congress, extended the invitation for a delegation "comprising whatever number of congressmen you see fit, accompanied by experts in the fields you deem relevant to the purpose of the visit, i.e. chemical, biological and nuclear."

The letter said the delegation would be given "every facility needed to search and inspect any plants and installations allegedly producing, or intended to produce, chemical, biological or nuclear weapons."

Chen leading Taiwan to disaster, warns China

REUTERS, Beijing/Taipei

China told Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian on Monday he was leading the island to disaster by backing a referendum on independence, as Taipei tried to contain the fallout from his boldest statement since taking power.

A Beijing spokesman said Chen proved he was determined to seek independence for an island China sees as a rebel province and has threatened to attack if it declares statehood.

"We seriously warn Taiwan splittist forces not to wrongly judge the situation, to immediately stop the horse at the edge of the precipice and to stop all splittist activities," said Li Weiwei, spokesman for the cabinet's Taiwan Affairs Office.

Beijing had been trying to avoid a

spat with Taiwan in the sensitive run-up to a leadership change later in the year, but Chen appears to be taking advantage of the reshuffle and strong U.S. support to steal ground on the issue, analysts said.

In his strongest comments on it since taking office in 2000, Chen said on Saturday that holding a referendum was a "basic human right" and in reality there was "one country on each side" of the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan's top policymaker on China sought to play down Chen's remarks, saying they did not signal a change of policy and were aimed at safeguarding the current position.

"Do not over-interpret" Chen's comments, said Tsai Ing-wen, head of the cabinet's Mainland Affairs Council.

Laden may not be behind Sept 11 attack: Musharraf

REUTERS, New York

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in the U.S. fight against terrorism, is not convinced that Osama bin Laden was the mastermind behind the Sept. 11 attacks, according to a report on Sunday.

"I didn't think it possible that Osama sitting up there in the mountains could do it," Musharraf said in an interview in the Aug. 12 edition of the New Yorker magazine, nearly a year after hijacked planes killed more than 3,000 people in New York, Washington and in Pennsylvania.

"He was perhaps the sponsor, the financier, the motivating force. But those who executed it were much more modern. They knew the U.S., they knew aviation. I don't think he has the intelligence or the

minute planning. The planner was someone else," Musharraf said about the Saudi-born militant.

The United States blames bin Laden and his al Qaeda movement for the Sept. 11 airplane attacks that destroyed New York's World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon in Washington.

After the attacks, Washington turned to Pakistan for help in its bid to crush the al Qaeda network and sees Musharraf, who came to power in a bloodless coup in 1999, as a key ally in its war on terrorism.

Musharraf, who extended his tenure for five years in an April referendum boycotted by most mainstream parties, told the New Yorker that the controversial constitutional amendments he has proposed would make sure Pakistan is well governed.