

Vajpayee blasts Pakistan for double standard

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister yesterday accused Pakistan of holding double standards on terrorism but said New Delhi was ready for talks over Kashmir when the atmosphere became "conducive".

Speaking at India's 55th Independence Day celebrations at New Delhi's Red Fort, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee also lashed out at Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, saying he should put his own house in order before criticising India.

"Terrorism is a cancer. Our neighbour, while joining the international community in fighting against terrorism, is sponsoring terrorism here, this is double standards," Vajpayee said, referring to Islamic militancy ravaging the divided state over the past 13 years.

"They did not succeed in war so they want to take Kashmir by cross-border terrorism. We want to say again that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and it will remain so."

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of fomenting the insurgency in Kashmir, which has claimed at least 36,500 lives since 1989.

But Musharraf in an address on Pakistan's Independence Day on Wednesday stressed Islamabad was merely supporting the struggle of the Kashmiri people for their right to self-determination.

Musharraf also described India's announcement of elections in Kashmir as "yet another effort to give a mask of legitimacy to its illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir".

Hitting back, Vajpayee said: "Those who call elections in

Kashmir a farce, should not teach us lessons in democracy. They should look into their own house first. Openly asking people (in Kashmir) to go against elections will not create a conducive atmosphere."

On a more conciliatory note, he added: "We want to live as good neighbours with Pakistan... India is ready to hold dialogue with Pakistan and for further de-escalatory steps, but the atmosphere should be conducive."

Vajpayee appealed to South Asian countries to unite to fight poverty rather than resort to conflict.

"Why can't we resolve our disputes through talks? We will do it. Why can't we fight together the real enemy poverty? It's a challenge. No one will come from outside and do it for us."

Citing recent massacres in Indian Kashmir, including of nine Hindus on a pilgrimage to the Armanath cave, he accused Islamabad of continuing to support the insurgency despite claims by Musharraf to have brought it to a halt.

On the coming elections in Kashmir, Vajpayee was emphatic.

"Elections are going to be held in Jammu and Kashmir. I am of the belief that they will be free and fair. No one should doubt that and I appeal to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh to enthusiastically participate in the elections and defeat cross-border terrorism."

"No one will be allowed to disrupt the elections. Those trying to create fear will be foiled."

The restive Himalayan state, he added, was ready for the elections, which will be held in four phases beginning September 16.



An aerial view of Charles Bridge across the Vltava and flooded houses in Prague's historical Mala Strana (Lesser Town) district on August 14.

Thousands flee Europe's worst flood in century

AFP, Prague

Surging floods threatening major central European cities have forced tens of thousands to flee their homes with hospital patients flown to safety and authorities desperately fighting to save national monuments and priceless works of art.

The death toll from more than a week of torrential rain rose to at least 90, with rivers and reservoirs from Germany to Russia spilling their banks in some of the worst flooding seen in Europe in more than a 100 years.

Cultural heritage sites, from medieval castles to irreplaceable works of art, were under threat in the 800-year-old Czech capital Prague and the German city of Dresden, while tourist attractions were sealed off and sandbagged.

On the human front, priority was being given to hospital patients and other vulnerable groups.

German army helicopters evacuated some 170 intensive care patients from hospitals in the flood-hit eastern city of Dresden overnight, a spokesman for the city said early Thursday.

Czech authorities ordered the evacuation of thousands more residents from Prague's city centre Wednesday as the devastating floodwaters poured into the 800-year-old capital.

Police and rescue teams worked frantically as Prague's 1.2 million residents saw the Vltava river reach its peak in the early afternoon at three times above normal levels, officials said.

Czech officials said the Vltava should now begin to recede.

Water lapped around historic monuments in the city centre, where residents of the picturesque Old Town and the former Jewish quarter were ordered to evacuate.

The Czech government had declared a state of emergency on Monday and some 200,000 people have

already been evacuated. Nine people have died so far, mainly in Prague and southern Bohemia, and around 1,000 have been rescued.

Czech President Vaclav Havel returned from holiday in Portugal to confront the disaster and discuss the government's responses with Prime Minister Vladimir Spidla, as the rest of Europe rallied in support.

On the Danube and the Elbe rivers the situation was deteriorating, meaning the worst may be still to come for parts of Austria and Germany where huge swathes of land were already underwater and some 20 people have died.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, after a brief visit to flood-hit Saxony, said eastern Germany was facing a disaster which could wipe out years of development work since reunification in 1990.

Saxony's historic capital Dresden was the worst affected area, although parts of the southern state of Bavaria are also ravaged, particularly the city of Regensburg.

Forecasters said eastern Germany could soon be hit by another wave of water flowing downstream from the Czech Republic.

The Danube was approaching record levels in Regensburg, up to five metres (18 feet) or more above the norm for this time of year, as well as in the Austrian capital Vienna.

Fresh floods hit eastern Austria Wednesday, just as tens of thousands of people in much of the rest of the Alpine country started to come to terms with losing everything after days of devastating heavy rains.

The Russian emergency ministry Wednesday revised last week's death toll from the flooding there upwards by one to 59.

Holiday villages swept away in Russian Black Sea coast flooding which claimed those lives were not up to proper safety standards, the state attorney's department charged.

Kim hails Korea accord, US waits

AFP, Seoul

North and South Koreans joined together to mark a key anniversary yesterday as the South's President Kim Dae-Jung said that accords struck with the North this week would only be a success if carried out.

The new demonstration of reconciliation to commemorate the 57th anniversary of the end of Japanese rule on the Korean peninsula was surrounded by tight security.

North Korea sent 116 people to join about 400 South Korean civic group activists at the raising of the unification flag and other ceremonies and art performances. Some North Koreans waved flags with the words "independent reunification."

Several thousand pro-Pyongyang students who were banned from going to the events by the nervous government staged their own rally at a Seoul university.

Despite the new talks with the North, the government feared supporters and opponents of the North could take advantage of the events to stage rallies.

Right wing activists have held anti-North demonstrations this week during the talks at which the two sides decided to hold new reunions of families kept apart since the 1950-1953 Korean War,

new economic talks and to speed up efforts to reconnect cross border rail and road links.

But they remain divided on talks needed to ease military tensions.

The ailing president, who could not attend Liberation Day events because he is recovering from pneumonia, released a speech in which he promised the government would do its best to make sure the accords were applied.

Kim said the three days of high-level talks had produced "meaningful agreements".

But he added: "What is important is carrying them out. The government will do its best so that these agreements will be faithfully implemented," Kim said in a speech read out by Prime Minister-designate Chang Dae-Whan.

The opposition Grand National Party (GNP), which has a majority in parliament, again condemned the Kim administration for not taking a tough enough line with the North over the deadly sea battle.

Even Kim's Millennium Democratic Party expressed regret that no military talks had been reached.

The United States reacted cautiously and said it would wait for talks next week between Japan and North Korea before deciding whether to send an envoy to Pyongyang.