

Naga rebels to talk peace with Delhi

AFP, Shillong

Exiled leaders of a frontline tribal separatist group and officials of the Indian government are expected to hold talks soon in Shillong, the capital of the northeastern state of Meghalaya, an official said Sunday.

Two leaders of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, have agreed for the first time to enter the peace process, a senior Indian home ministry official said.

"Since August 1997, when the NSCN entered into a ceasefire with the Indian government, talks between the two sides were held in various South Asian cities with their leaders staying abroad," the official said.

The next round of talks, the official added, were expected to be held in Shillong, with the negotiations being "given shape" by New Delhi interlocutor, K. Padmanabhaiah.

US pushes Lankan peace

AFP, Colombo

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who is due here this week, is expected to give a push to Norwegian-backed peace efforts ahead of landmark talks between the antagonists, diplomats said Sunday. Armitage, expected on Thursday, is likely to nudge the Colombo government and the rebel Tamil Tiger rebels to seek an early end to the island's conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives, the diplomats said.

They said although Armitage is not meeting top leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during his overnight visit, his mere presence in the former rebel heartland of Jaffna will be seen as a strong signal to the Tigers.

"His visit to Jaffna sends a powerful message to the LTTE," a government official said. "The US supports a solution that does not break up Sri Lanka into two countries."

Troops kill 7 intruders in Kashmir

REUTERS, Srinagar

Indian security forces said on Sunday they killed seven Muslim rebels who tried to sneak across a military cease-fire line into disputed Kashmir from Pakistan.

The incident took place on Saturday night in the Keran sector southwest of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, which is at the heart of a military standoff between India and Pakistan.

New Delhi, which is battling a nearly 13-year-old insurgency in Muslim majority Kashmir, has said its huge military will stay fully deployed on the border with Pakistan until all rebel incursions into Kashmir from Pakistan stopped.

Laden, Omar hiding in region, says Afghan minister

REUTERS, Kabul

The Afghan foreign minister said Saturday he was certain Saudi-born guerrilla chief Osama bin Laden and ousted Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar survived last year's U.S. bombing and were living in the region.

But Abdullah Abdullah told Reuters in an interview he was confident the two men, who disappeared after U.S.-backed Afghan factions took control of most of the country last November, would be found.

"The possibility (is they are) living in some remote part of the country (Afghanistan) or in a neighbouring country," Abdullah said.

"It is more likely...at this stage, he (bin Laden) is not in Afghanistan, but certainly in the region."

Blacks rally for slavery reparations

AFP, Washington

Thousands of black Americans gathered on Washington's National Mall Saturday to mark the 115th anniversary of Marcus Garvey's birth, in a rally of support for reparation payments to blacks whose ancestors were slaves and suffered segregation in the United States.

"We are a few thousand. We are here to ask for reparations now!" declared Stephanie Middel, one of the event's organisers, nonetheless noting that she had hoped for a better turnout.



PHOTO: AFP

Hungarian men row in a canoe along a flooded street in front of a restaurant on the banks of the Danube river in the north part of the Hungarian capital, Budapest on Sunday. Floods are expected to reach their peak in Budapest with experts predicting record highs.

Floods threaten new towns as EU leaders gather for summit

AFP, Berlin

Waters from the Elbe river bore down on more German towns Sunday as leaders from European nations hit by the worst floods in living memory prepared to meet in Berlin to discuss the massive rebuilding job.

Some 40,000 people were evacuated from around the town of Wittenberg in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, the latest in a series of communities to be hit by waters that have washed down from Prague since early last week.

Sand-bagging operations were in full swing in nearby Pratau, where water gushing from a gaping 20-metre (60-foot) hole in a dam headed toward Wittenberg, once one of Europe's cultural centres and home to the theologian Martin Luther.

The floods have wreaked devastation across central Europe,

leaving more than 90 people dead and tearing homes and livelihoods apart. More than 4.2 million people have been affected in Germany alone and over 100,000 have fled their homes.

New evacuations were ordered in the Czech capital Prague Sunday amid fears that more buildings undermined by the swirling Vltava river would collapse, further north, the Elbe was expected to fall to six metres from levels of more than nine metres by midweek.

In Hungary, meanwhile, more than 20,000 people were working to reinforce dykes in anticipation of record flood levels expected to hit Budapest later in the day, the disaster management service said.

A spokesman said about 1,100 people had been evacuated, and water was already lapping at the base of their empty homes.

About 1,700 people have been evacuated throughout Hungary and 28 villages north of Budapest could be engulfed by rising rivers, the service said.

With flood damage Europe-wide climbing into tens of billions of euros, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was preparing to host a flood summit with leaders from the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia and the European Union.

The Financial Times newspaper reported on Saturday that European Commission President Romano Prodi was preparing to offer more than one billion (dollars) for flood repairs to Germany during the meeting in Berlin.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) proposed Sunday to the four leaders of the flood-ravaged countries special loans which would cover as much as 100 percent of those projects it funded.

War on terror Bush's 'top priority'

US walks tightrope in keeping ties with leading Arab allies on track

AFP, Crawford

President George W. Bush on Saturday reaffirmed his commitment, as a top priority, to winning the war on terror, urging Congress to give its final approval to a massive defence budget bill.

"Winning the war on terror is our top priority. The men and women fighting the war must have every tool and all the training they need to fight and win," Bush said in his weekly radio address.

"We must be disciplined with our taxpayers' money, which requires Congress to focus on funding our nation's priorities," said Bush, speaking from his "Prairie Chapel" ranch here.

The bill, which would give the Pentagon 355.4 billion dollars to spend on personnel, equipment, security and training, includes the largest budget increase for the Defence Department in more than 20 years, worth 34.4 billion dollars more than in fiscal 2002.

The bill, voted overwhelmingly by the 100-member Senate must now be reconciled with the appropriations passed earlier this year by

the lower House once Congress reconvenes after the month-long vacation.

Meanwhile, whether pressuring Egypt on a human rights case, or handling post-September 11 questions about Saudi Arabia and terrorism, the United States is treading in delicate territory with its top two Arab allies.

These frictions have not done much to ease a climate already soured by disagreement between the US administration and Arab states over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the possibility of a US-led military assault on Iraq, US analysts said.

Beyond sporadic rows, "the more serious issue is that US policy is more and more criticised in the Middle East, and that Washington appears to be on a track that Arab countries cannot support," said Charles Butterworth, a University of Maryland expert on the region.

News that Washington would not grant Egypt aid beyond that already budgeted as long as an Egyptian-American intellectual, Saad Eddine Ibrahim, remains in prison drew a

less-than-delighted response from Cairo which protested against any external pressure.

Relations with Riyadh have rumbled through a bumpy patch since August after an expert with the independent Rand Corporation, in a Pentagon meeting, accused Saudi Arabia of supporting terrorism.

The friction resurfaced Thursday with the filing of a multi-trillion-dollar lawsuit by relatives of the victims of the September 11 attacks against Saudi Islamic organisations and three top royals, alleging they supported the al-Qaida network and its leader Osama bin Laden.

An early Saudi reaction came Friday in an article in the Al-Riyad newspaper close to the Saudi government which calls on authorities to review relations with the United States.

"The rising vitriol against Saudi Arabia is reducing the likelihood that the United States will be able to address its real problems with that country," Rachel Bronson of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote in an op-ed published in the Los Angeles Times.

Breakthrough in talks

Jethmalani claims 'limited success' in pursuing militants to join Kashmir polls

AFP, Srinagar

A top separatist leader has agreed to take part in upcoming elections in Indian Kashmir provided they are linked to seeking a permanent solution to the Kashmir problem, an Indian government-backed committee said Sunday.

Kashmir Committee head Ram Jethmalani acknowledged, however, that his group had achieved "limited success" in trying to persuade separatists to join a greater process of dialogue on the future of the restive Himalayan state.

The committee, which has been in Indian-administered Kashmir since Friday, held a second round of talks Sunday with Shabir Shah, head of the separatist Democratic Freedom Party.

"Shabir Shah reiterated to the Kashmir committee that he is not averse to taking part in the elections as a means to identify the genuine representatives of the people of Jammu and Kashmir for a permanent solution to the Kashmir problem through future negotiations," committee member M. J. Akbar, editor of the Asian Age newspaper, said in a statement.

Shah, who has spent more than 20 years in different prisons, said on Friday that he had accepted an invitation for talks on Kashmir issued by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his deputy L.K. Advani.

A similar invitation has been extended to Kashmir's main separatist

alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, which has yet to decide whether to accept or not.

In what analysts regard as a breakthrough, however, the Hurriyat, after holding talks with Jethmalani's seven-member committee on Saturday, said it had agreed to hold a second round of talks in New Delhi.

If they make good their pledge, it would mark the first time separatist leaders have travelled to New Delhi for talks on Kashmir with a committee that has the backing of the Indian government.

"The committee is slightly disappointed that it has not yet secured the participation of the Hurriyat Conference (in the polls) but the talks will continue. They will be resumed soon in New Delhi. We hope to make a breakthrough," Jethmalani said.

"The entire sub-continent is now poised at a critical juncture in its political history," he told a press conference wrapping up his committee's visit.

"The entire sub-continent is now poised at a critical juncture in its political history," Jethmalani said.

"A tidal wave of revulsion against terrorism and religious fundamentalism, combined with a new commitment to expanding the frontiers of democracy at secularism is now strengthening the globe.

"Our committee came to Srinagar to make the local leadership take cognizance of this gigantic force, and use it to resolve the long standing Kashmir problem," he said.

Hatred deep down in heart

Most Indians consider Pakistanis as 'enemy'

AFP, New Delhi

Most Indians perceive Pakistan as an "enemy" while an attack on Islamic rebel training camps in Pakistan was the most favoured option of ending "terrorism" in Indian-Kashmir, an opinion poll by a weekly news magazine reported Sunday.

Of the 17,776 people surveyed, 68 percent viewed Pakistan as "an enemy," according to the poll, commissioned by news magazine India Today and conducted by market research firm ORG-MARG.

The magazine said this finding illustrated the "hawkish perceptions" of the majority of Hindus.

Only 37 percent of the Muslim respondents considered Pakistan as an enemy.

"Forty-nine percent of Muslims have a rather cheerful view of Pakistan as an estranged brother, a

friend and a future ally," the magazine said.

About 38 percent of respondents advocated military strikes on Islamic militant training camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir to end what New Delhi describes as "terrorism" in the Indian administered zone.

Only 18 percent believed negotiations with Pakistan could resolve the problem.

A number of Indians -- 38 percent -- were of the view that New Delhi has handled the eight-month-old military stand-off with Pakistan "very well", with 41 percent of those surveyed saying India was the victor in the face-off.

"There is a widespread approval of the government's handling of the face-off with Pakistan and the nuclearisation of India still commands a staggering 70 percent approval," the survey found.

The survey -- titled "The Mood of

the Nation poll" -- sought the opinions of eligible voters across 19 Indian states and about 100 parliamentary constituencies, India Today said.

The respondents were "representative of the urban and rural areas," included men and women and "all age and social groups," the magazine added.

India accuses Pakistan of arming, funding and training Islamic militants battling New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir, a charge that Islamabad denies.

More than 36,500 people have died in Indian-Kashmir since the beginning of the Muslim insurgency in 1989.

Tensions between India and Pakistan rose sharply after an Islamic militant attack on India's parliament complex last December by gunmen New Delhi claims were

sponsored by Islamabad -- a claim it denies.

That attack resulted in the arch rivals massing tens of thousands of their troops on their common borders since January, triggering international fears of a nuclear conflict between the two.

According to India Today, the survey threw up "worrying signs of the emotional gulf" between India's majority Hindus and minority Muslims, which was not limited to Pakistan.

About 47 percent of Hindu respondents favoured the construction of a temple to the warrior god Ram in the northern temple town of Ayodhya on the ruins of the razed 16th century Babri mosque.

"Predictably, this is not a solution favoured by Muslims," the magazine said.

Personal locators for parents

AFP, Washington

Recent reports of kidnappings have sparked parents' fears and the imaginations of US inventors, who have responded by offering "personal locators," a kind of electronic chaperone.

One apparatus resembles a bracelet, another is like a beeper and one due out soon has a chip that may be implanted under the skin, systems that use mobile telephone technology and take advantage of the Global Positioning System to zero in on the wearer to within 20 meters (65 feet).

Digital Angel, based in St. Paul, in the north-central US state of Minnesota, is set to be one of the first to enter the market with its launch in the spring of a bracelet connected to a box worn on the waist.

For 399 dollars and a monthly service charge of 30 dollars, the apparatus will not only give the precise position of the wearer, but will also let you know if your son, daughter or Alzheimer sufferer has wandered outside a prescribed area or has fallen and is unable to get up within a minute.

"We went into production early

this year," said Amro Albanna, of Digital Angel Corp.

"We have sold about 200 units already," Albanna said.

The company has about a thousand orders, even before the launch of its most recent version, which is the size of a small matchbox. Albanna said she is swamped with orders because all summer, hardly a day has passed without news of a kidnapped, lost or murdered child.

Another entrepreneur, Timothy Neher, has worked on his design for the past for four years, since he lost his niece and nephew at the zoo.

Today, he heads Wherify Wireless, in Redwood Shores, in the western US state of California, where he is going to place his bracelet-style locator on the market in September.

Encased in blue or violet, a tiny sending-receiving unit weighing less than 110 grams (3.8 ounces) will cost 400 dollars -- before the monthly service charge of 25 to 50 dollars.

The locking bracelet is unbreakable and its alarm goes off automatically if tampered with. It even has a panic button for a child to press in case of emergency.



PHOTO: AFP

A young boy pays his last respects to the murdered 10 year old girls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman by putting down a teddy bear outside the church in the Cambridgeshire village of Soham in Britain on Sunday. A special prayer service was held in memory of the two girls who went missing two weeks ago.



PHOTO: AFP

Pope John Paul II blesses a small girl dressed in Polish traditional costume at Blonia field in Krakow on Sunday. More than 2.5 million people gathered for the biggest open air mass ever in Poland. The 82-year old pontiff, despite suffering from Parkinson's disease and arthritis which have left him almost immobile arrived in Krakow on his eighth papal visit to his native Poland.

US sees more al-Qaida men in Pakistan than in Afghanistan

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The American general leading the campaign against al-Qaida fighters in Afghanistan has said there may now be more of the extremists operating in Pakistan than in the original theatre of war. Lieutenant-General Dan McNeill, the commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, conceded that his task was now more complicated as the coalition does not have the right to conduct combat missions in Pakistan.

McNeill told AFP that while President Pervez Musharraf's government had been one of the staunchest supporters of the US-led war against terrorism, sympathy for al-Qaida remained strong in tribal areas of Pakistan.

The general was reluctant to put a figure on the number of al-Qaida fighters still at large, but suggested fewer than 1,000 were now in Afghanistan.

"I think in Afghanistan they probably still exist, they could number in the hundreds. I think just

outside Afghanistan's borders ... their numbers could be in the hundreds, maybe even a thousand," said McNeill.

"(But) if your follow-up question is to corroborate what I have just laid out, I have no substantive information."

Hundreds of al-Qaida fighters are thought to have crossed the border into Pakistan from the south-eastern border province of Paktia in the aftermath of Operation Anaconda in March, the largest coalition offensive of the 10-month campaign.

Pakistan has since been conducting its own operations against the extremist fighters. It is understood that US agents have also taken part in some of the missions.

"I have seen that the Pakistanis concede there are indeed al-Qaida in Pakistan," said the general.

"I have seen no numbers attached but it would not surprise me to learn, and I do not know, that there are indeed more al-Qaida in Pakistan than there are in Afghanistan."