



South Africans dance on Friday during the opening ceremony by the NGO forum as a prelude to the World Summit on Sustainable Development which takes place in Johannesburg, from August 26 to September 4. PHOTO: AFP

US happy with Pak actions to stop infiltration

AFP, Islamabad

The United States is convinced that Pakistan is doing its best to stop militants crossing into Indian-controlled Kashmir, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said Saturday.

Speaking after meeting with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf for more than one hour Armitage said he accepted assurances that Pakistan was sincere in its promise to end the infiltration, which has brought the two South Asian nations to the brink of war.

"There is some obvious infiltration across the Line of Control, but our friends here assure me that this is not being sponsored by the government of Pakistan," Armitage said.

The Line of Control is the de facto border dividing the disputed state into Pakistan- and Indian-controlled zones.

Earlier Reuters says: A top U.S. diplomat took a new South Asia peace mission to Pakistan on Saturday, travelling from nuclear rival India amid fresh reports of violence in the disputed Kashmir region.

On Friday, as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage held talks in New Delhi, Pakistan ratcheted up the tensions by accusing India of committing "a highly escalatory act" by launching a ground and air attack on a mountain post in the north of the Himalayan region.

And on Saturday, police in Indian Kashmir said suspected rebels had shot dead eight Muslim villagers, including three women, in an early morning attack.

On arrival in Islamabad, Armitage held talks with Pakistan's minister of state for foreign affairs, Inam-ul-Haq.

He was due to have meetings later with military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and other officials on issues ranging from tensions with India to the U.S.-led war on terror, in which the Pakistani leader is a key ally.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmad Khan said Pakistan hoped Armitage's mission, which follows a visit by Secretary of State Colin Powell last month, would help push an "intransigent" India toward talks on

Kashmir.

"We hope that they will be able to get them round to see reason and start the dialogue," he told Reuters.

India denied the air strike claim on Friday. Its defense minister, George Fernandes, called the allegation "a big lie."

India's last major air strikes against Pakistani forces were during the 1999 confrontation in Kashmir's Kargil region that almost plunged the two countries into their fourth war.

There was no independent confirmation of either claim but each side has accused the other of undermining Armitage's visit.

Speaking to reporters in the Indian capital, Armitage said he could not comment specifically on the issue.

"There has been too much violence as a general matter and we'll do whatever we can to reduce the violence," he said.

The latest row comes during an election campaign for a new assembly in India's Jammu and Kashmir state that New Delhi hopes will underline the legitimacy of its rule but fears Pakistan and Islamic separatists will try to derail.

Pakistan has dismissed the planned election as "farical."

Armitage said the United States wanted to see a free and fair election, but was concerned about the possibility of violence. He said this was an issue he would discuss in Pakistan.

India and Pakistan have massed a million men along their border since a December attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based guerrillas.

Tension rose again in May this year, and the two sides appeared on the brink of wider conflict.

Armitage's last peace mission in June helped calm tensions. Incidents of artillery and small arms fire across the cease-fire line fell off dramatically.

Even so, Indian police said 16 people had been killed in separate clashes in Indian Kashmir over the past 24 hours.

Indian dam leakage forces evacuation

AFP, Bhopal

More than 10,000 people have been moved to safer places as a huge earthen dam in northern India developed a "massive" leak, an official said Saturday.

Evacuation work in about 14 villages began soon after the almost 88-year-old Ahmadpur dam in Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh state developed the breach Friday night due to flooding caused by heavy rains.

The official said the mass evacuation was arranged as it was feared the dam might soon burst.

On Wednesday, 10 people died and 24 others went missing after

the Jamuniya dam burst in the same state, submerging about two dozen villages.

The Ahmadpur dam is smaller than Jamuniya dam with a capacity of about 250 million cubic feet (7.5 million cubic metres) of water.

Balghat officials led by administrator Rajesh Rajora have been camped at Ahmadpur since Friday night when the breach was first noticed.

"We have evacuated all the villages in the neighbourhood and have been putting sandbags at the massive breach. So far things are under control," Rajora told AFP by telephone.

Nagaland talks tough against NSCN rebels

AFP, Guwahati

The government in India's north-eastern Nagaland state on Saturday threatened to take action against two tribal separatist groups for violating an ongoing ceasefire and jeopardising peace talks to end 55-years of bloodshed.

"We cannot remain silent and shall be forced to take action as the two factions of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) were engaging in violent fratricidal clashes despite the truce," Nagaland's police chief Heso Mao told AFP by telephone from the state capital Kohima.

"Both the groups were disturb-

ing the peace process."

The warning comes a day after the two warring rebel armies fought a pitched battle with bombs and automatic weapons killing one militant and injuring an unspecified number near the village New Chamukidema, 20 km from Dimapur, Nagaland's commercial hub.

"About 30 to 40 heavily armed cadres of the Isak-Muivah faction attacked an illegal camp of the rival group Friday and that in itself is a gross violation of the ceasefire ground rules agreed upon," the police chief said. "We are combing the area and chasing the militants away."

Pak indigenous submarine launched

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's navy on Saturday launched its first domestically made submarine ahead of six months of sea trials, military officials said.

"Pakistan has joined the elite club of few countries around the world who can make submarines," Pakistan navy chief Admiral Abdul Aziz Mirza said at a ceremony at the Karachi dockyard.

Construction of Pakistan's second Agosta 90-B began in 1998. It has been named as the SAAD after a legendary Muslim warrior.

Protestors assail Bush on Iraq

AFP, Dana Point

Chanting "drop Bush, not bombs," roughly 150 protestors demonstrated in this tiny enclave Friday against US President George W. Bush's stated aim of ousting Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Inside a swank resort hotel, Bush sang the praises of his Republican party's embattled California gubernatorial hopeful at the second of three fundraisers aimed at bringing his candidacy back on the brink.

Outside, cordoned off by police and closely watched by Secret Service agents charged with Bush's safety, demonstrators paced in front of the sprawling Dana Point tennis club, waving crudely drawn signs and doing their best to drown out Bush supporters.

Moussaoui denied access to classified information

AFP, Alexandria

Zacarias Moussaoui, the only man charged in the United States in connection with the September 11 attacks, was denied a request for access to classified information by the presiding judge Friday.

"The United States opposes this motion arguing that significant security concerns justify denying the defendant access to classified material in this case," wrote Judge Leonie Brinkema in a decision handed down by the court in Alexandria, Virginia, outside Washington.

Benazir softens tone

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's former premier Benazir Bhutto said in a television interview aired Saturday she would return to her country if allowed to fight elections there.

A two-time premier of Pakistan, Bhutto is barred from another term as prime minister by a law introduced by military leader President Pervez Musharraf which disqualifies any former leader from running for a third term in office.

She also faces arrest on her arrival in Pakistan on corruption related charges, but she told the BBC she was prepared to go to jail and would contest the election even as a prisoner.

"I don't mind going to prison as

long as I can contest those elections," she said, speaking from her apartment in London. She has been living in self-imposed exile in the United Arab Emirates and London since 1998.

But Farhatullah Babar, spokesman for Benazir's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), said Saturday her return was never in doubt.

"She has declared time and again that she will return to Pakistan and contest elections, even from behind the bars of jail," he said.

"She will return. The decision has been taken and it is not a question of whether, it is only a question of when."

In an interview with AFP earlier this week, Musharraf said if Bhutto

went ahead with her plans he would not prevent her plane landing at Pakistani airports, nor prevent her entering the country through airport immigration.

"She goes through in a normal manner and we arrest her and we take her straight to the jail," he said in an interview at his official residence outside Islamabad.

Benazir, who was dismissed twice as premier in 1990 and 1996 on corruption charges, said she was confident she could "overcome" the bar on her participation in the elections, which she said she could win.

Asked about the corruption allegations, she said they had been set aside and she had done nothing wrong.

Iraq goes in offensive against US

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq, strengthened by growing worldwide support against a US offensive, forged ahead Saturday with plans to resist the United States, announcing a diplomatic charm offensive.

Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan sounded the rallying call, mixed with a warning that Arab countries face dangers too if the United States seeks to overthrow the Baghdad regime.

"In a few days, emissaries of President Saddam Hussein will be sent to all Arab countries to update their leaders on the real situation," Ramadan said.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who openly embraced the United States to save them from Iraqi forces in 1991, came in for special mention by the vice president.

"We are confident that they understand the American threats against Iraq are against the whole Arab nation and confirm the intentions of the US-Zionist administration to attack the capacities of the nation, be it in Iraq, in Saudi Arabia, in Egypt, in Syria or elsewhere," he told al-Itihad weekly.

Ramadan said Iraq "hopes for more" from Saudi Arabia, noting that Riyadh's position "is moving towards the rejection of any attack against Iraq as several Saudi leaders have said on more than one occasion."

Baghdad's ties with Riyadh, broken since the 1991 Gulf War, are warming.

The first Saudi Arabian trade fair to be held in Iraq since Baghdad invaded

Kuwait in 1990 is to open on September 9. A big Saudi trade delegation is expected and major Saudi firms will attend, the official al-Itihad weekly said.

Rapprochement began at an Arab summit last March as it did with Kuwait, and has been bolstered by Saudi Arabia's steadfast refusal to countenance a US-led attack on Iraq from its soil.

Ramadan said Thursday that Baghdad would be ready to restore ties when Riyadh decided the time was right. Iraq was also looking to continue to mend fences with Kuwait, he added.

Foreign ministers of the six Gulf Arab states, who have individually all expressed opposition to a new war on Iraq, are to meet on September 2-3 to study the US threats.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will review the "situation between Iraq and Kuwait, and Iraq's implementation of the pertinent UN Security Council resolutions in light of increasing tension between Iraq and the United Nations."

The GCC noted "the increasing intensity of US threats to launch a (military) strike against Iraq and the GCC opposition to such policies because of their negative and dangerous consequences on the security and stability of the region."

Ramadan went on to say that the opposition of several European countries, notably Germany, to the US plots could give impetus to Iraq's ties with the European Union.

LTTE-Colombo talks on Sept 16

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is set to rebuild war-ravaged areas as the island's peace hopes were raised with the announcement of formal negotiations in Thailand next month, officials here said Saturday.

A team of development bankers are to travel to the rebel-held Kilinochchi region Monday and assess the rehabilitation needs of areas held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), government officials said.

The head of the government's Peace Secretariat, Bernard Gunatilleke, said he had held talks with the LTTE Friday to prepare the ground for Monday's reconstruction talks.

"We want to have a better understanding of their hopes and wishes so that we can start the talks early next week knowing what the needs are," Gunatilleke said.

The move came as Norway announced the first round of internationally-backed talks aimed at ending three decades of ethnic

bloodshed in Sri Lanka would open in Thailand on September 16.

"In consultation with the Thai and Norwegian authorities, the parties have decided to hold the first round of talks from September 16 to 18, 2002," the Norwegian government said in a statement received here late Friday.

"The Norwegian government will announce the (exact) venue for the negotiations and information on press access closer to the time of the talks."

The statement quoted Norway's

Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen as saying there would be difficulties ahead, but that both displayed commitment to seek a durable settlement to the conflict.

The fighting has claimed more than 60,000 lives in the Tigers' quest for an independent homeland for the island's Tamil minority.

"There is no reason to conceal that there are considerable difficulties ahead," Helgesen said. "But there is also a determination on both sides to seek a lasting political settlement of the ethnic conflict."



Sri Lankan twins perform in a cultural show during a ceremony of the "Twin's Cultural Centre" in Colombo late Friday. The group seeks recognition from the government for the welfare of tens of thousands of twins in the country. PHOTO: AFP

US charges 131 people with Sept 11 attacks

AP, Washington

The government has charged 131 people with crimes as a result of its investigation of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, but Zacarias Moussaoui is still the only person in custody for allegedly being involved in the plot, a senior Justice Department official said Friday.

Many of those charged were people whose alleged crimes make it easier for terrorists to operate, like helping people commit identity theft or create false documents. The official would not give a breakdown of what crimes the people are accused of committing.

Of the 131 people charged, 75 are in custody pending trial or sentencing.

Of the 56 not in custody, three are considered fugitives, seven

have been deported and the rest are still being sought. Six cases were dismissed.

Eighty-five people have pleaded guilty to charges and 31 cases are pending.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the Justice Department's primary focus is on preventing another terrorist attack. Bringing any possible culprits of the Sept. 11 attacks to justice is of secondary importance to law enforcement agents, the official said.

Critics of the tactics used in the investigation said the Bush administration's broad approach has led to an erosion of civil rights and few terrorist arrests.

Attorney General John Ashcroft has been more concerned with cracking down on civil liberties

than actually finding the people who are guilty of a specific crime," said Lynne Hallard, a spokeswoman for Civil Liberties Focus, a Chicago-based think-tank. "The Justice Department has only arrested one person in connection with Sept. 11 but has eroded the entire nation's civil rights in an attempt to smoke them out."

Bill Williams, a former FBI counterterrorism agent, said the fact that no one else in the United States has been connected to the plot may suggest the true culprits, except for al-Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden, are all dead.

"This is an investigation unlike any other in history and unlike many crimes, the primary criminals are all dead by their own hands," Williams said. "They've already been punished."



Local residents struggle to reach the bank as they swim through the Dongting Lake in China's central province of Hunan on Saturday. Water levels in China's Dongting Lake rose further, threatening to flood its surrounding area and devastate millions of lives, as soldiers and civilians stood ready to plug breaches in its dykes. PHOTO: AFP

Chinese flood in fury

AFP, Beijing

Water levels in China's Dongting Lake rose further Saturday, threatening to flood its surrounding area and devastate millions of lives, as soldiers and civilians stood ready to plug breaches in its dykes.

Water levels in the city of Yueyang, off its northern shores in Hunan province, crept up seven centimeters overnight to 34.88 meters, an official with the Yueyang flood-control office told AFP.

To the south at Yiyang city, levels rose by five centimeters to 31.91

centimeters, an official in Yiyang's flood-control office said.

The lake's rise seemed to slow on Saturday. But a senior official quoted by the state news agency Xinhua warned that even modest rain in the next few days could greatly worsen the situation. Rain is forecast in the coming days.

China has mobilised more than a million people, including 15,000 troops and 100,000 militia members, to shore up defences around Dongting Lake as well as surrounding rivers, and evacuated 600,000 people from the area, according to

official figures.

"The good news is there's no rainfall in practically three days, ... so the pressure on the lake has been lessened," said International Red Cross delegate Jasmina Pitrovic.

But she agreed even a little rain can worsen the situation because the lake, likened by some to a balloon filled with water about to burst, has been swollen by heavy runoff from China's longest river the Yangtze and four smaller rivers during a wet summer.