

Vajpayee to attend SAARC summit in Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will travel to Pakistan for the next South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in January, junior foreign minister Digvijay Singh said Thursday.

"The Indian prime minister will go to Pakistan for the SAARC summit next year," Singh told Aaj Tak television.

"He is going there for the SAARC summit, not for the bilateral process. Heads of state of all SAARC countries will be there."

SAARC, which has seven members, holds an annual summit of heads of state and government, but the meetings have often been scuttled by bickering between India and Pakistan.

Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf both attended the SAARC summit this January in Nepal's capital Kathmandu, but the Indian side said it conducted no bilateral talks at the meeting.

N Korea confesses to developing N-arms

US suspends talks, Pyongyang urged to abide by N-agreement

AFP, Washington

The United States said that North Korea had admitted to secretly developing nuclear weapons in breach of a 1994 agreement, as the Cold War foes plunged into their deepest crisis in years.

The startling confession, made to a US envoy early this month, prompted the Bush administration to conclude that negotiations with Pyongyang were impossible for the moment, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Wednesday.

President George W. Bush now faces the potential of an alarming showdown with a state he has branded as one-third of an "axis of evil" as he confronts a possible war with Iraq and a campaign against global terrorism. The admission could also deal a fatal blow to South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung's "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North and threatens Pyongyang's new dialogue track with Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

North Korean officials admitted they had continued to develop nuclear weapons after they were presented with evidence of the program in talks earlier this month with senior State Department official James Kelly.

Kelly told North Korea "we had recently acquired information that indicates that North Korea has a program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons in violation of the Agreed Framework and other agreements," Boucher

said.

"North Korean officials acknowledged that they have such a program." Pyongyang tried to blame Washington and said they considered the 1994 deal, known as the Agreed Framework, "nullified," Boucher said.

"The United States and our allies call on North Korea to comply with its commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and to eliminate its nuclear weapons program in a verifiable manner," Boucher said in the statement.

"We seek a peaceful resolution of this situation. Everyone in the region has a stake in this issue and no peaceful nation wants to see a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Meanwhile, South Korea on Thursday urged North Korea to abide by nuclear agreements following US revelations that the Communist state had admitted to forging ahead with a secret nuclear weapons programme.

"We urge North Korea to abide by all agreements including the Geneva accord (of 1994 freezing its nuclear programme) and the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Tae-Sik said in a televised statement.

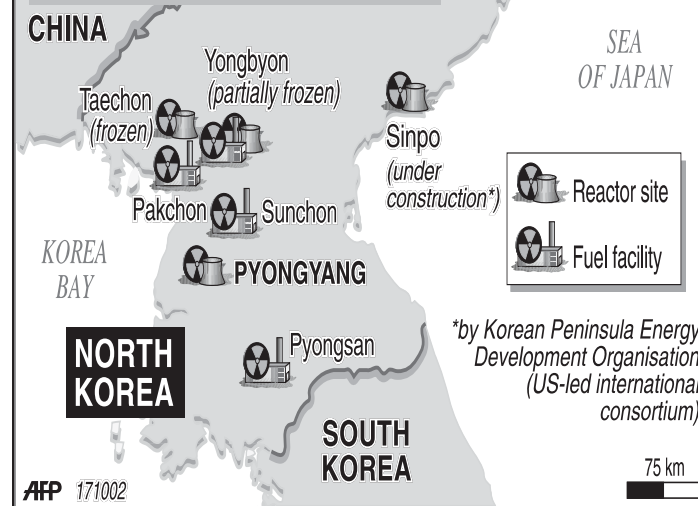
Moreover, China on Thursday said a row over North Korea's alleged admission that it has secretly acquired nuclear weapons should be "settled peacefully", but avoided further comment on the issue.

North Korean nuclear facilities

Stalinist state has broken and suspended accord

1994 US-North Korean accord

- North Korea would freeze its military nuclear program, including reactors at Yongbyon and Taechon
- US would build two light-water reactors which produce less weapons-grade nuclear material, supply oil before reactors built



AFP 171002

Lanka calls for snap election

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government said Thursday it would press for a snap election in a showdown with President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is critical of its peace drive with Tamil Tiger rebels.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government had originally wanted to strip Kumaratunga of her power to dissolve parliament from December 5, or one year after the last election.

But the matter has been sent to the supreme court, which is expected to call instead for a national referendum on whether to curb presidential authority.

Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris, the government spokesman, said the ruling coalition "does not intend to go for a referendum."

The government would rather "face a snap parliamentary election to enhance its mandate by placing before people a wide range of issues, whereas a referendum would be limited to a single issue," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Several Australian women hug each other as they visit the blast site in the tourist area of Kuta, near Denpasar on Thursday. At least 119 Australians are feared dead in the October 12 bombing of two establishments killing more than 180 people and injuring hundreds.

Foreigners, locals involved in Bali bomb attack

Australia warns of new threat, urges citizens to leave

AFP, Jakarta

Both foreigners and Indonesians were involved in the bombing on the island of Bali, Jakarta said Thursday amid reports militants from Yemen and Malaysia masterminded the attack.

A Bali police spokesman said seven Indonesians and one foreigner of undetermined nationality were being intensively questioned over the attack five days ago.

The bombing in the resort town of Kuta killed at least 185 people, with victims coming from more than two dozen countries. But this figure is widely suspected to be a large underestimate.

Australia, one of the worst hit countries along with Britain and Indonesia, said it was now feared 119 of its nationals died in the blast, which ripped through two nightclubs packed with foreign tourists.

"There must be involvement of foreign nationals in this case together with Indonesian people but once again I have to wait until the investigation is enough to give a kind of clarification," top security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono told a press conference in Bali.

Foreign leaders have voiced suspicion that the attack was planned by al-Qaeda, possibly in conjunction with the Jemaah Islamiyah regional Islamic militant group. An international police team is hunting the bombers.

The minister also named elderly Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir as one of the leaders of Jemaah Islamiyah. He promised legal action if Bashir or others were proved to be engaged in acts of terrorism.

"There are many scenarios and I would not prematurely give you who

is behind this incident -- what community, what political elements in this country -- because you know that terrorism now has a domestic as well as an international network," Yudhoyono said.

Meanwhile, Australia's government on Thursday said it had received "disturbing new threats" against Australian interests in Indonesia since last weekend's deadly bombing in Bali and urged its citizens to leave the country.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told parliament the new warning of terrorist threats was "based on intelligence material we received a number of hours ago."

It came just as Prime Minister John Howard arrived in Bali to attend a memorial service and meet with relatives of the more than 170 Australians killed or missing since Saturday's bombing of a night club.

Melbourne mosque firebombed

AFP, Sydney

Arsonists who firebombed a Melbourne mosque Thursday in retaliation for the Bali bombing have threatened further attacks against Muslims, an Islamic community leader said.

The firebombing was the second attack on a Muslim religious site since the weekend bombing in Bali which killed scores of Australians.

No one was injured but windows were smashed and carpets burned when the firebomb was thrown through the mosque window in suburban Melbourne before dawn.

The fire was put out by people who were in the mosque.

Mosque spokesman Noor Dean said the attackers also daubed anti-Islamic graffiti on the building.

"They had graffitied the sign with 'FOI', which means 'f---off Islam'," he told Australian Associated Press.

"There were threats like 'you get out or we'll be back again,'" he said.

"This is a backlash from (Bali). The community is aware of that."

Indonesia detains Muslim group leader

AFP, Jakarta

Police in the Indonesian capital said Thursday they have arrested the leader of a radical Muslim group as a suspect in a series of attacks on nightspots.

Muhammad Rizieq Shihab leads the Front for the Defenders of Islam, a militant group which in the past two years has attacked and vandalised bars, cafes and other entertainment spots accused of harbouring drug abusers and prostitutes.

"He has been detained since last night on suspicion of violating Article 160 of the penal code," Jakarta police spokesman Anton Bahrul Alam told AFP.

The article covers incitement to violence or other lawbreaking and is punishable by up to six years in jail.

Police were continuing to question him on Thursday, Alam said. Shihab said his detention "is more of a blessing" than a punishment.

"I can pray more solemnly and I can recall Koranic verses and

hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Mohammed) which I have forgotten. Praise be to Allah," he said on radio.

Police have said eight other Front members will also be prosecuted following attacks on several nightspots this month.

The Front's activities usually intensify around the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which begins this year in early November.

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-populated state but is mostly moderate in its observance of Islam.

The government has been under international pressure to crack down on Islamic extremism amid concerns that Indonesia may have become a haven for religious terrorists.

At least 185 people were killed in an attack on Indonesia's resort island of Bali late Saturday. Suspicion has fallen on Jemaah Islamiyah, described as a Southeast Asian terror network with link to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

Pakistan to reciprocate Indian troops pullout

China for early Indo-Pak dialogue

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan announced Thursday it would withdraw troops from its border with India "shortly," a day after India announced a phased troop withdrawal from the nuclear-armed neighbours' international border.

"The government of Pakistan has decided to withdraw its forces from the Pakistan-India border to their peace-time locations," a foreign ministry statement said.

"The pull-back will commence shortly," the statement added.

The decision was taken at "a high-powered meeting" chaired by President Pervez Musharraf.

The announcement came within minutes of Pakistan's welcoming of India's move to pull back troops, which it hailed as "a step in the right direction."

The South Asian foes have had around a million troops between them deployed along their shared frontier, including both the Line of Control (LoC) in disputed Kashmir and the internationally recognised border, since December.

The mass deployment followed an escalation of tensions after an attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi on December 13, by gunmen New Delhi accused Pakistan of backing.

India has had around 700,000 troops, including 200,000 believed to be on the LoC, and Pakistan around 200,000-300,000 troops on their common frontier.

The Pakistani announcement did not give any more specific timeline than "shortly."

Nor did it outline its position regarding troops along the LoC, the de facto border dividing the Pakistani-

controlled northern third of Kashmir with the Indian-controlled southern half of the Himalayan region.

India's Defence Minister George Fernandes said Wednesday "there will be no lowering of the vigil in Jammu and Kashmir," giving the formal name for the Indian state.

PTI adds: China on Thursday urged both India and Pakistan to resume early "direct" dialogue to ease tensions in south Asia.

Reacting to India's decision on Wednesday to pull back its troops deployed in forward positions along the international border with Pakistan, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said Beijing welcomed the move.

"We welcome all measures that will defuse India-Pakistan tension," she said.

Cost-benefit analysis prompts Indian troop pullback

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In deciding to pull back its biggest and heaviest troop mobilization from the international border with Pakistan, India has weighed in cost-benefit ratio, analysts here say.

The decision by the cabinet committee on security presided by Prime Minister AB Vajpayee here on Wednesday evening is seen here as a bold move fraught with risks, politically at home and militarily.

Ahead of the meeting of the cabinet committee on security, the full meeting of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and National Security Council had met and were understood to have recommended a phased withdrawal of troops from the international border. The cabinet committee on security went a step further.

Government sources say successful completion of the assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir and an assessment of cost-benefit ratio of maintaining over half a million troops, tanks and heavy weaponry along the border on a state of permanent alert for nearly a

year were factored in the decision for their withdrawal. India had gone for the massive military mobilization soon after the terrorist attack on its Parliament on December 13 last year.

They say the free and fair elections in Jammu and Kashmir and defeat of ruling National Conference has generated a political dynamism in the state that will take away the appeal of militancy.

However, the Vajpayee govern-

NEWS ANALYSIS

ment may have exposed itself to criticism not only from the opposition but also from some of its hard-line ally Shiv Sena in ordering de-escalation.

After all, the de-escalation was decided on without New Delhi receiving any concession from Pakistan that it will reciprocate the gesture, completely halt cross-border terrorism, close terrorist training camps in Pakistan and hand over to India the 20 most wanted

people sought by Indian government.

In fact, there is recognition here that even after the de-escalation decision Pakistan will not stop cross-border infiltration. In fact, what is being feared in official circles here is that infiltration might go up with radical groups performing well in recent elections in Pakistan and their pivotal role in government-formation in that country.

This is the third major step taken by India in recent months to de-escalate tensions with Pakistan. Indian warships were withdrawn from strike positions in the Arabian Sea close to Pakistan in May this year and prior to that India had lifted ban on use overflight facility to Pakistani planes. However, Pakistan has persisted with its curbs on Indian aircraft flying across its aerial territory.

Apparently, the Western countries' pressure on Vajpayee government for scaling down its aggressive stand of keeping up the military mobilization against Pakistan weighed heavily on India's decision to pull back the troops.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian soldiers patrol in the area of the Line of Control near Poonch on Thursday some 210 km from the Kashmir winter capital Jammu. India announced on Wednesday it would withdraw troops from its frontiers with Pakistan, but would maintain its full deployment in the divided region of Kashmir. The decision marks the biggest step towards de-escalation of tensions between the nuclear-capable rivals since they geared for war in the wake of an attack on India's parliament last December.

Maharashtra files case against Thackeray

PTI, Mumbai

Maharashtra government on Wednesday registered a case against Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray for his statement on Dussehra day exhorting his followers to set up suicide squads to tackle cross-border terrorism.

"A case under section 153(A) of IPC has been registered against Thackeray at the Shivaji Park police station," Minister of State for Home Kripashanker Singh said.

The section 153(A) deals with offences relating to the promotion of enmity between different groups on the grounds of religion, race and language among others and with acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony.

Thackeray had made the statement while addressing Sena's annual Dussehra rally at Shivaji Park in central Mumbai.

Deputy Chief Minister Chhagan Bujbal had on Wednesday stated that text of Thackeray's speech would be sent to the Union government if the state finds the content "provocative".