

# India finds it 'difficult' to attend SAARC summit in Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

It will be "very difficult" for Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to attend a South Asian summit in Pakistan early next year if key regional trade pacts are not implemented before then, a key advisor to the premier said.

In an interview with the BBC's Hard Talk Programme aired on Thursday, national security advisor Brajesh Mishra, who is also principal secretary to Vajpayee, made it clear India had not yet decided whether to attend or not.

"We could consider it, but in the absence of any substance to the summit, of course it's very difficult for the prime minister to go," Mishra told the BBC's Tim Sebastian.

India and Pakistan have been at loggerheads since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, with a dispute over the Himalayan state of Kashmir sparking two of their three wars between them since then.

Both control parts of Kashmir and claim all of the scenic Himalayan region. India accuses Pakistan of funding and arming the anti-Indian rebellion in its zone that has left more than 37,500 people dead since 1989, or twice that according to separatists.

Both sides had massed hundreds of thousands of troops on their shared borders, sent there after the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament, which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based militant groups.

SAARC, formed in 1985, groups India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

When asked if India would like Vajpayee to go to Pakistan and meet President Pervez Musharraf, Mishra said: "It's not a question of liking to meet General Musharraf or otherwise. It's a question of what is the summit going to do..."

"These symbolic meetings, they don't work. If there is some substance, yes, we can do that."

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PHOTO: AFP

Angry protestor shout anti-US slogans while holding a placard during a demonstration against the arrest of an Iraqi doctor by the American and Pakistani agents in southwestern city Quetta on Wednesday. Protestors demanded withdrawal of US agents from Pakistan and stop arresting Pakistani professionals. Western and Pakistani agents arrested Iraqi doctor Shaukat Hikmat, who headed a Saudi-run hospital for Afghan refugees on October 30 for interrogations in connection with his links with al-Qaida.

# Pakistan confirms pullback of troops from frontline

## Indian deployment to remain intact till demining ends

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan confirmed Thursday that it had begun pulling troops back from the international border with India after a high stakes military standoff with its nuclear rival lasting some 10 months.

"We have moved some troops to peacetime locations," military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi told AFP.

He said the troops were being withdrawn "from time to time as India pulls back its troops."

The nuclear-capable neighbours had around a million troops facing off across its common frontier since December, following a deadly attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

India mobilised some 700,000 troops to frontline positions along the internationally recognised border and the ceasefire line in disputed Kashmir known as the Line of Control (LoC). Pakistan followed suit, deploying an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 troops.

The heavy militarisation almost erupted into a war which many feared could go nuclear in January and May. The arch-rivals, who have already fought three wars -- two of them over Kashmir -- were pulled back from the brink of all-out confrontation by intensive international lobbying led by the United States and Britain.

India announced on October 16 that it would withdraw troops from forward positions along the international border, while maintaining an estimated 250,000 troops on the LoC.

Pakistan said it would reciprocate but would not start its troop withdrawal until New Delhi made the first move.

Earlier this month, the Indian army said it had begun redeploying its offensive formations and would complete the process by the end of December, provided its phased withdrawal was matched by a pullout by Pakistan.

"We had already indicated that the moment the threat from India recedes, and as India withdraws troops, Pakistan would reciprocate," Qureshi said.

India's defence minister George Fernandes on Wednesday acknowledged that Pakistan had pulled some troops back to peace-time locations.

"However, the strategic reserves of the Pakistan army continue to be located in the operational location," he said in written reply to a question in the upper house of India's parliament.

Fernandes said the pace of Pakistan's withdrawal indicated that it "intends to undertake the process in a phased manner."

Qureshi said the withdrawal process was "ongoing" but declined to go into detail about troop numbers and movements, saying they were operational areas.

"Whenever the threat recedes, we reciprocate," he said.

PTI adds: Requisite number of troops will remain deployed till the clearing of mines, laid on the international border during 'Operation Parakram', is over, Defence Minister George Fernandes said on Thursday.

Plans have already been drawn up for mine clearance operations and "the requisite number of troops will remain deployed" till these are completed, he told Lok Sabha in a written reply during Question Hour and added there would be "no lowering of vigil" in Jammu and Kashmir.

Stating that forward deployment of troops since last year had drawn international attention, he said "the experience gained during the mobilisation has enabled the Army to reassess and revalidate its operational plans and procedures."

He said the infiltration from across the border in J&K has "come down considerably" compared to figures in the corresponding period last year.

After elections in J&K were conducted successfully despite terrorist violence and intimidation, the Cabinet Committee on Security on October 16 decided that the armed forces be asked to redeploy from positions on the international border with Pakistan.

In reply to another question on Kargil war, Fernandes said a total of 522 soldiers, including 26 officers and 23 Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs), were killed in that war.

Since the Kargil conflict, another 1754 soldiers including 108 officers and 150 JCOs were killed till November 22 this year.

# Pak hardliner wins key election

AP, Peshawar

A hardline Islamic candidate won a key election Wednesday in a strategic Pakistan province believed to be sheltering al-Qaida and Taliban fugitives, signalling the rise to power of a religious bloc that has vowed to keep US forces out of its territory.

Leaders of the United Action Front have also promised to install Islamic law in the province, located on the rugged border with Afghanistan where American soldiers have been hunting for terrorists.

Before the vote that elected Bakht Jehan speaker of the North West Frontier Province legislature, members of his coalition led prayers condemning the United States for the war in neighbouring Afghanistan and asking that "America (be) ruined and destroyed."

After sweeping Oct. 10 elections, the United Action Front coalition is poised to become the first Islamic provincial government in Pakistan's history.

# 4 children die in knife attack at Chinese school

AFP, Beijing

A knife-wielding man apparently suffering mental illness stabbed four elementary pupils to death and injured another three at a school in southern China, officials and doctors said Thursday.

The man burst into Shilong Elementary School in Guangdong province on Tuesday afternoon and went on a rampage inside classrooms with a large knife, attacking seven pupils in all, local police said.

A doctor at the local Huajiji County People's Hospital said four of the injured pupils, who were aged between eight and 10, had died.

"One died at the scene and another soon afterwards in hospital. Despite emergency treatment, another died just after midnight today (Thursday) and the fourth earlier this morning," he told AFP, giving his name as Dr Wen.

Of the three remaining, one was still in a "serious" condition, he added.

# Tigers ready to accept regional autonomy

## US, Japanese interest driving Lanka peace

AFP, Colombo

The leader of the Tamil Tiger rebels said Wednesday he was prepared to accept regional autonomy for his people within Sri Lanka, dropping a decades-old demand for independence.

But Velupillai Prabhakaran warned that the separatist struggle would resume if negotiations for self-rule broke down.

In a speech broadcast on rebel radio, Prabhakaran said he would "favourably consider a political framework that offers substantial regional autonomy and self-government to the Tamil people on the basis of their right to internal self-determination."

But he added: "If our demand for regional self-rule based on the right to internal self-determination is rejected, we have no alternative other than to secede and form an independent state."

The Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) entered a ceasefire in February and in their first round of peace talks in September the Tigers' top negotiator, Anton Balasingham, dropped the demand for independence and agreed to pursue regional autonomy.

However, this is the first time the elusive Prabhakaran, who has not attended the peace talks himself, has commented on the issue. The 48-year-old LTTE supremo rarely makes public statements and enjoys the fierce loyalty of rebel cadres.

Prabhakaran was speaking to mark "Heroes Day," which commemorates the more than 17,000 rebels who have died fighting to establish a homeland separate from the island's majority Sinhalese community.

More than 60,000 people have died in the conflict in the past 30 years.

Prabhakaran had unusually warm words for Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who revived the dormant peace process when he was elected a year ago.

The rebel leader blamed the

failure of previous peace bids on the "hardline attitude and deceitful political approaches" of previous administrations in Colombo.

"Now the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe is attempting to resolve the problems with the Tamils with sincerity and courage," the rebel leader said.

Meanwhile, heightened US and Japanese interest in Sri Lanka's fledgling peace bid has boosted prospects of ending Asia's bloodiest ethnic conflict, a Norwegian peace broker said.

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, a key figure in bringing Sri Lanka's warring parties to the table, said the greater international involvement was good for the peace process.

Sri Lanka has no known oil reserves and lost the strategic geographic value of its World War II Allied base of Trincomalee, a natural harbour in the island's east, with the development of long-range ships and aircraft.

# Canada bans Harkat, Jaish for Kashmir violence

REUTERS, Ottawa

Acting after prolonged pressure from the parliamentary opposition, the Canadian government has banned Pakistan-based Harakat ul-Mujahidin and Jaish-e-Mohammed for their involvement in the acts of terror in Jammu and Kashmir.

The two outfits were among a number four others including the Palestinian terrorist movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad. All the six have been banned for their involvement "in terrorist activity".

Members of the military arm of Hamas, the Islamic terrorist group, have taken part in suicide attacks that have killed dozens of people in Israel. Islamic Jihad said it staged the ambush that killed 12 Israelis earlier this month.

"The decision to list an entity is a very serious one and listing carries severe consequences -- not only for terrorists, but also for their supporters," Solicitor-General Wayne Easter told parliament.

"This list is just one example of the many steps this government has taken in the global effort to shut down terrorism financing. And we will keep adding to this list, as we

have done today."

Stockwell Day, foreign policy spokesman for the official opposition Canadian Alliance party, has long called for the banning of Hamas.

But Ottawa has so far brushed off his demands to totally outlaw the Lebanese guerrilla group Hizbollah, despite what Day says is clear evidence from the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) that it should be banned.

"The decision to allow this terrorist organisation to carry out its CSIS-documented activities in Canada is outrageous. Perhaps it will take a horrific tragedy before this government finally cracks down on these terrorists," said Day.

In late 2001 Ottawa outlawed the military wing of Hizbollah but has so far resisted calls to ban the movement's political wing. Easter denied Day's charges that the government was dragging its feet.

"We're interested in getting it done right, not in getting it done fast," he told Reuters in a phone interview, saying Ottawa was concerned about infringing upon civil liberties.

# Congress-BJP workers clash in Gujarat

PTI, Ahmedabad

In a pre-poll clash, supporters of BJP and Congress indulged in violence, causing injuries to at least two persons at Randhikpur assembly constituency, close to Godhra in Panchmahals district of Gujarat late on Wednesday night, police said.

"About 20 party members of BJP and Congress had a heated argument over some issue that resulted in violence," Deputy Superintendent of Police (Panchmahals) Narsimha Komar told PTI and added "some party workers were beaten with sticks and few small cabins were set on fire by enraged activists."

However, the situation was soon brought under control with timely police intervention and offences were booked against those involved in the clash, Komar said adding that there was no tension in the region at all.



PHOTO: AFP

A European young primary school boy kisses his mother behind armed Indonesian military guards, as he goes to school in one of the international schools in Jakarta on Thursday. International schools in Jakarta reopen on Thursday after a two-week long closure sparked by terror attack warnings.

# Kashmiris flee homes in border areas amid Pak shelling

AFP, Srinagar

Residents of a border town in Indian Kashmir have fled their houses and offices and taken shelter in bunkers after the Pakistani army opened up with artillery and mortar fire, police said Thursday.

"The unprovoked shelling by Pakistani troops started (mid-morning) and is still continuing in Uri township and its surrounding villages," a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir.

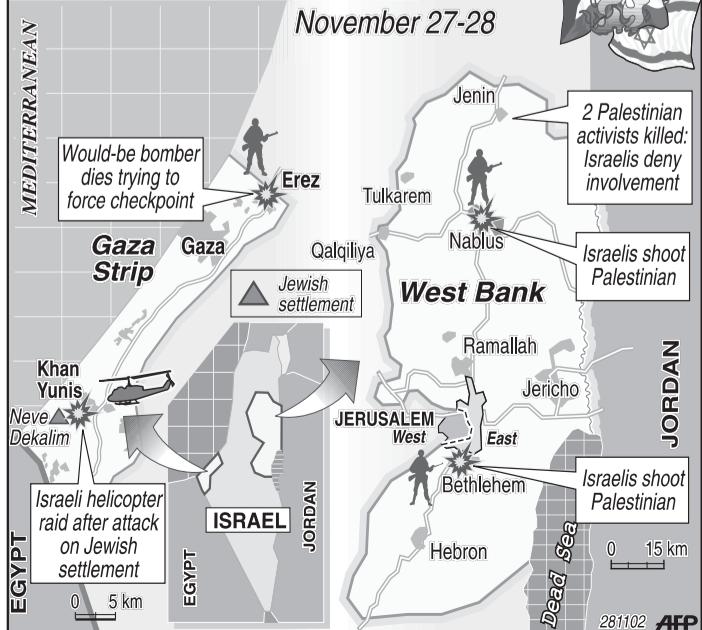
He said over a dozen shells landed in Uri, 100 km north of Srinagar at the start, sparking panic

in the area. "The shelling closed down all the offices and shops in the hilly township," he said, "and people took shelter in underground bunkers."

The shells also hit more than a dozen villages surrounding Uri. "Initial reports suggest that five residential houses have been damaged in today's shelling," he said, adding the details would come only after the shelling stops in the area, which borders Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Police said there were no immediate reports of casualties. He said Indian troops returned fire at the Pakistani army.

# The violence continues



# Raid on 3 former DMK ministers' houses in TN

PTI, Chennai

Sleuths of the Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) on Thursday raided houses of three former DMK ministers - K Anbazhagan, K N Nehru and I Periyasami - in the city and other parts of the Tamil Nadu state.

DVAC sources said Anbazhagan's houses in the city were raided regarding "irregularities" in allotting seats in the teachers' training institutes in the state while the houses of Nehru and Periyasami were being searched in connection with "wealth cases".

Raids were conducted at 14 places belonging to Nehru in several parts of the state including two in the city while 14 places of Periyasami were being raided in Dindigul district. The raids began at 9 am, the DVAC sources told.

# Kashmir CM calls for peace talks with militants

AFP, Srinagar

The new leader of Indian-administered Kashmir said Thursday he will seek to persuade India to hold talks with separatists in an effort to secure peace in the Himalayan state.

"I will persuade the Centre (New Delhi) to hold dialogue with the elected representatives of the people and other shades of opinion for resolution of the Kashmir issue," Chief Minister Mufti Sayeed said in a statement.

India says it will hold only talks under the Indian constitution with armed rebel groups that lay down arms and eschew violence.

Separatist and militant groups alike want unconditional dialogue

and insist that these be held outside the parameters of the Indian constitution.

Sayeed, whose regional Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and India's main opposition Congress formed the new government in Kashmir early this month, want to begin unconditional talks with the rebels and the separatists.

"If talks could be held with Nagaland ultras, why not in Jammu and Kashmir as well," Sayeed said, referring to dialogue between New Delhi and militants active in the eastern state of Nagaland.

The leader said the 87-member state assembly has a "true representative character" and that a committee drawing legislators from all the political groups would be

formed to hold talks with New Delhi. The chief minister asserted that his coalition government would create conditions "congenial for restoration of peace with dignity and honour."

During the September/October electioneering in Kashmir, Sayeed promised that if his party came to power he would strive for unconditional dialogue between the rebels and New Delhi.

"It is on these promises that we have been mandated by the people to work for peace and ending their miseries," he said.

He, however, added that these are formidable challenges before the government that would be met. "We don't have a magic wand, but determination and will," he observed.