

Division of Kashmir no solution: Pak PM

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali has ruled out the division of Kashmir as a solution to the decades old dispute with India over the Himalayan territory, reports said on Saturday.

"It is not right to suggest that the division of Kashmir is being contemplated," the official Associated Press of Pakistan quoted Jamali as saying.

The prime minister, talking to reporters late on Friday, said there was no change in Pakistan's long-standing "principled stand" on the Kashmir issue.

Pakistan wants the dispute to be resolved in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people via relevant United Nations resolutions that were adopted in 1948-49 and call for a referendum to allow Kashmiris to choose between union with India or Pakistan.

Rejecting allegations of allowing cross border terrorism into

Indian-controlled Kashmir, Jamali said Pakistan had repeatedly declared that it would never allow its territory to be used for any terrorist activities anywhere.

There has been speculation in the media that the Line of Control (LoC) that separates the Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir could be made permanent to settle the row.

US Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage during his visit to Islamabad on Thursday was asked whether the US favoured making the LoC a permanent border. He said it was not for the US to decide.

"This is a question for the parties themselves to decide, and that's long been our position," Armitage said.

The rivalry over control of Kashmir has caused two wars between the nuclear neighbours and remains a sore point in their relations. India controls two-thirds of the territory and the rest is under Pakistani control.

Armitage begins talks with Indian leaders

AFP, New Delhi

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage Saturday began talks with senior Indian leaders during a daylong visit aimed at consolidating recent peace initiatives between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan.

Armitage, whose delegation includes Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca, arrived in New Delhi late Friday.

He kicked off the day with talks with the leader of India's opposition Congress Party Sonia Gandhi.

He is also expected to meet Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, his deputy Lal Krishna Advani, Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha and Finance Minister Jaswant Singh.

His visit was planned before an unexpected thaw in relations triggered by Vajpayee's sudden offer for talks with Pakistan on April 18.

Both sides have since announced the resumption of diplomatic and air links which were severed 17 months ago.

Armitage, who is keen not to be seen as a mediator, denied Washington had put any pressure on New Delhi and Islamabad to start talking.

"I want to dispel the notion that there is pressure from the United States," he said Thursday in Pakistan.

He told reporters there that cross-border violence was down compared to 12 months ago, adding Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf had denied the existence of militant training camps in Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

But if such camps existed "they will be gone tomorrow," Armitage quoted Musharraf as saying.

Cross-border infiltration of Islamic rebels is at the heart of tensions between the countries and brought them to the brink of war after a deadly attack on India's

parliament in December 2001 which New Delhi blamed on gunmen backed by Islamabad.

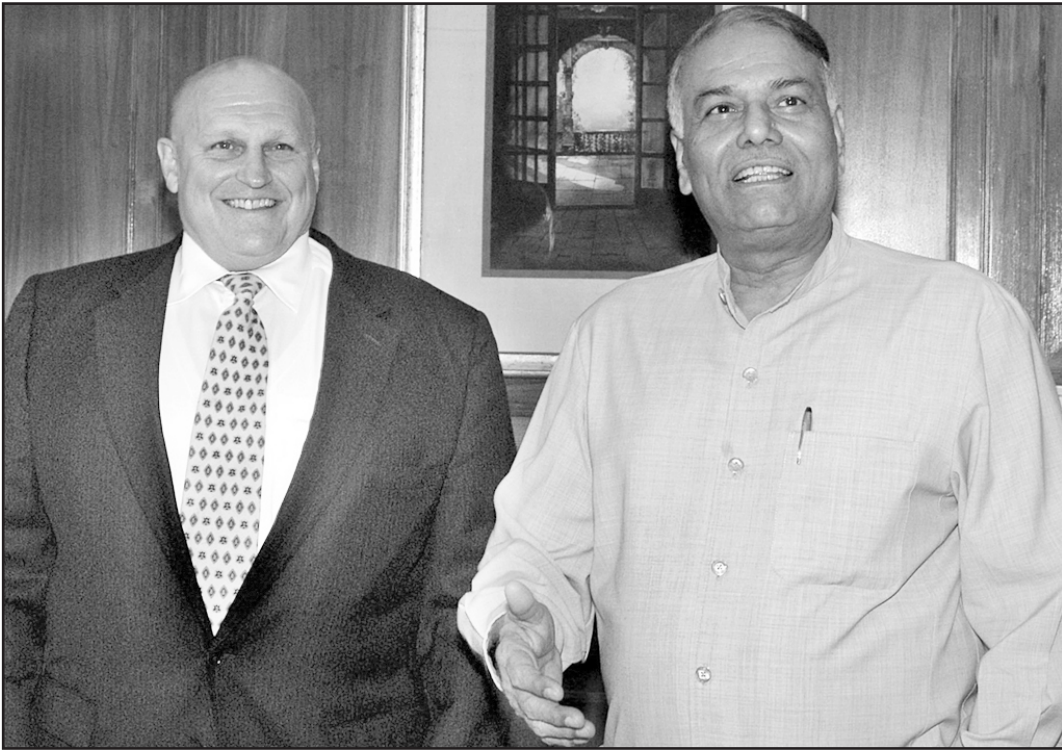
It was Armitage who doused the flames then, spearheading an international diplomatic offensive and winning a war-averting pledge from Musharraf to permanently end infiltration.

But New Delhi says infiltration has not stopped.

On Friday Advani urged Pakistan to end cross border infiltration into Indian-Kashmir and dismantle terrorist training infrastructure in the region.

An Indian official told AFP that India was not convinced by Musharraf's new assurance.

"One, we know the camps do exist. Second, if Musharraf says they will be wound up tomorrow, that means he is in control of the rebels, which puts paid to his earlier remarks that the militants operate independently," the official said.



US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage (R) meets Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha in New Delhi on Saturday. Armitage began talks with senior Indian leaders on a daylong visit aimed at consolidating recent peace initiatives between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan.

Child killed in Indo-Pak firing in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A six-year-old Muslim boy was killed and three other people injured when Indian and Pakistani troops traded artillery and mortar fire over their de facto Kashmir border, police said Saturday.

The overnight exchange of fire, in the northern Kupwara district, came during a trip to South Asia by US envoy Richard Armitage who is hoping to build on peace overtures between the nuclear-armed rivals.

A police spokesman said the injured included two children and that the casualties were reported in the village of Nichan in Kupwara's Karna sector.

He charged that Pakistani troops opened unprovoked fire at Indian positions and that Indian forces "effectively retaliated."

Fierce exchanges came to an end shortly before midnight (1830 GMT), although there were small-arms exchanges intermittently throughout the night, he said.

West Bengal steps up security ahead of polls

AFP, Kolkata

Security in the West Bengal was stepped up ahead of local elections, after pre-polls violence claimed at least 20 lives, officials said Saturday.

Police inspector general Chayan Mukherjee said the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh was sealed off to prevent troublemakers entering the state on election day Sunday.

"Indian border troops have been alerted to check infiltration during the election," Mukherjee told AFP.

"All precautionary steps are being taken to hold a free and fair election."

Pre-poll violence between members of ruling Marxist Communist parties and the opposition has claimed at least 20 lives in the past month, Mukherjee said.

Opposition leaders put the death toll at 47.

The state's top election official, Ajoy Sinha, said nearly 30 million people would vote for 58,357 seats on village councils, which are elected every five years.



PHOTO: AFP

Quarantined residents chat as a masked military policeman (L) stands guard over the sealed-off area of Huachang apartments in the Wanhua district of Taipei on Saturday where authorities have sealed off an apartment complex of 140 homes after one elderly resident was suspected to have died of SARS. Taiwan's health authorities reported five more deaths on Saturday from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and 23 new cases, taking the toll to 18 from 172 cases.

India's top security official moots India-US-Israel anti-terror axis

AFP, New Delhi

India's National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra, currently on an official visit to the United States, has proposed an anti-terror alliance between the US, Israel and India, reports said Saturday.

"Such an alliance would have the political will and moral authority to take bold decisions in extreme cases of terrorist provocation," Mishra said in an address to the American Jewish Community in Washington on Friday, according to the Press Trust of India (PTI).

Mishra said preventive measures like blocking financial supplies, disrupting networks, sharing intelligence and simplifying intelligence procedures could only be effective through international cooperation.

This is not the first time India has proposed such a triad, stressing that the three democracies were all targets of international terrorism.

Mishra met Friday with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, a day after talks with his US counterpart Condoleezza Rice.

Indian media reported Mishra had a 15-minute unscheduled meeting with US President George W. Bush when he went to the White House to meet Rice.

PTI called the meeting "substantive."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Mishra and Powell had a "very good meeting on a broad range of issues in US-India relations, but also about the question of India's relations with Pakistan."

Malaysian PM hints at snap polls after Oct

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on Saturday hinted that Malaysia may hold a snap election after he steps down in October and urged his ruling National Front coalition to secure a resounding victory.

"National Front coalition members must get ready for an election. They must give total support to the National Front," Mahathir told reporters after leading the annual meeting of the Malaysian Indian Congress, a senior partner in the ruling coalition. "In these challenging times, we need a strong government to ward off those who try to undermine us."

The 77-year-old leader has announced he is to step down in October and his heir apparent, deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, would stand at the head of the party at the polls.

Ministers ask Chandrika to call snap polls to settle cohabitation crisis

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan ministers Saturday asked President Chandrika Kumaratunga to call snap elections to avoid a deepening crisis in the cohabitation government, political sources said.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe held an emergency cabinet meeting hours after warning Kumaratunga not to go ahead with plans to take over the functions of a ministry.

In their first major power tussle since Wickremesinghe defeated her party at parliamentary elections in December 2001, Kumaratunga on Friday took over the lucrative Development Lotteries Board from the Economic Reforms ministry.

Before she could give legal effect to the move by publishing the decree in the official gazette, however, the government overnight shut down the state printing presses, officials said.

Police were deployed to guard the presses while the road leading to the press was also sealed off by armed police, officials said.

There was no immediate word from the president, who had travelled to the central region of the island.

"The cabinet discussed the matter at length and the feeling was that they should ask the president to call a snap election if she is not agreeable to work in the cohabitation arrangement," a political source here said.

13 killed in bomb blast in southern Philippines

AFP, Cotabato

Thirteen people were killed and 11 others wounded Saturday when a bomb, suspected to have been planted by Moro rebels, exploded in the southern Philippine city of Koronadal, officials said.

The bomb, consisting of an 81 mm mortar and a timing device, went off in front of the public market, scattering bloody body parts, local army commander Colonel Agustin Dima-ala said.

Hospital officials and police numbered 13 casualties, with many of the wounded in critical condition.

Dima-ala said among the dead may have been the person responsible for planting the bomb.

Police earlier attributed the blast to a grenade, but bomb experts later identified its source.

Regional police Chief Superintendent Rodolfo Tor, said the Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) may have been behind the attack since it followed the pattern and methods of earlier MILF bomb attacks.

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu, however, denied the group had any knowledge of the bombing of the majority-Christian city, located 960 kilometers (595 miles) south of Manila.

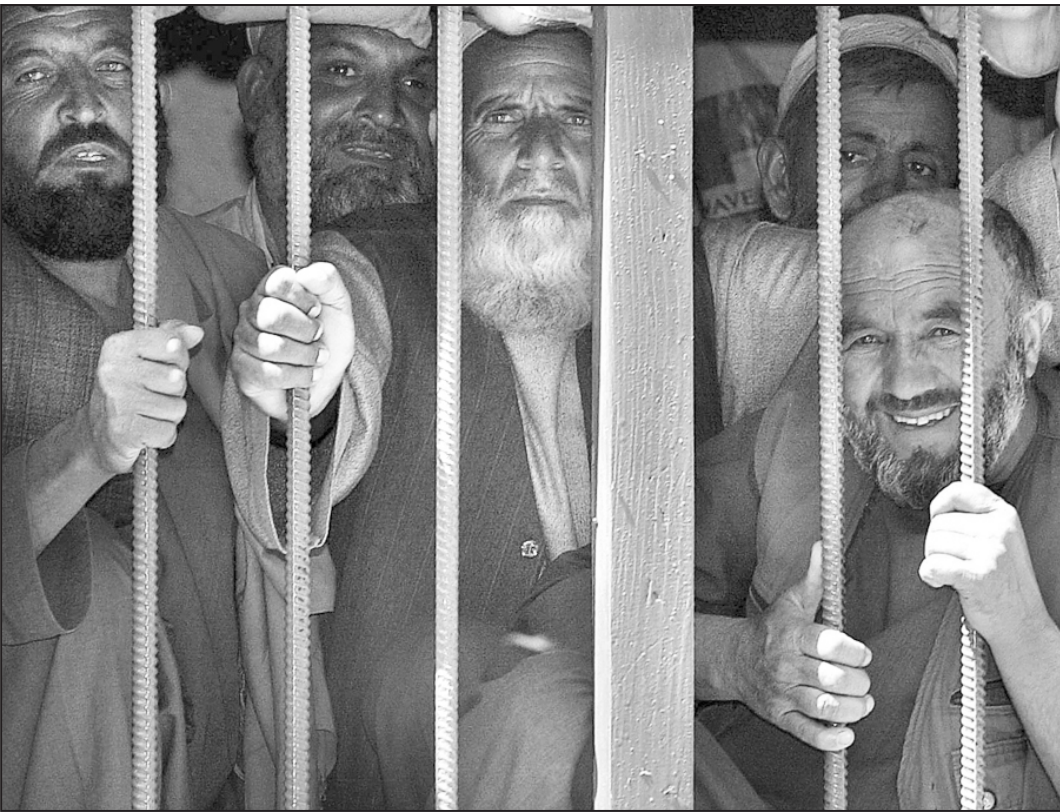


PHOTO: AFP

Afghan prisoners standing in Kabul prison on Saturday look at a group of prisoners (not in picture) turned over to Afghan authorities after their release from the maximum security detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Until now only 23 of the more than 660 prisoners have been released from the maximum security detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Most of them were captured in Afghanistan during the war that toppled its Taliban regime following terrorist attacks on New York and Washington September 11, 2001.