

Pakistan welcomes int'l mediation on Kashmir

Peace overtures have improved Indo-Pak ties: US

PTI, Washington

Pakistan welcomes "mediation, pressure, facilitation, encouragement" or any such other role of the US and the rest of the international community in resolving the Kashmir issue, Khurshid M Kasuri, the Pakistani foreign minister, said here Thursday.

Kasuri told the Heritage Foundation, a non-governmental think tank, that the international community, particularly the US, is already playing a role - whatever name is given to that role - in pushing India and Pakistan towards resolution of Kashmir issue and Islamabad welcomes that.

Asked whether the US played any role in Prime Minister Vajpayee's latest offer of talks with Islamabad, Kasuri said the US has played a very positive role.

The US efforts were quite evi-

dent last year; when India and Pakistan was on the verge of war, the US was "running hither and thither" to prevent a war, and for that "we should be grateful," he elaborated.

Kasuri, who has already met Vice President Dick Cheney, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice during his current US visit, said there is now an element of optimism in South Asia as a result of the two country's renewed efforts towards starting dialogue.

Pakistan, he said, has decided it wants friendship with India but it will not tolerate hegemony. He also said Pakistan needs US arms and spares because its fears of India are not imaginary. He claimed there are more fundamentalists in the Indian Parliament than in Pakistan.

IANS adds: Pakistani Foreign

Minister favours a two-tier approach to the proposed talks with India that would include a parallel dialogue between Kashmiris on both sides.

He said the representatives of the governments of India and Pakistan should hold talks at one level and those of the people of Kashmir living in India and Pakistan at another level.

He wanted the two sets of negotiations to proceed on parallel lines and said the people could be associated with government-level talks at a later stage. However, the Kashmiris should have a say in any future solution, he asserted.

He advocated "flexibility" on all sides in handling the protracted Kashmir problem.

Throughout his speech, Kasuri sounded quite optimistic. "Both India and Pakistan have come to the realisation that war will not

solve any disputes between the two countries," he said.

Kasuri waxed eloquent on how Islamabad's cooperation with Washington in the war against terrorism has placed Pakistan on the centre stage of US foreign policy. He said he was positive that the US-Pakistan alliance would now become a mature and enduring one due to the increased understanding and deeper appreciation of each other's positions.

Meanwhile, US on Friday said the recent peace overtures between India and Pakistan have helped in normalising bilateral relations and believed that the two countries are inching towards a dialogue.

"The White House is pleased with moves towards an Indo-Pakistan dialogue", Press Officer Scott McClellan told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan Legislator, Ishaq Khan Khakwara (2nd R) pauses for a moment while addressing a press conference with other legislators M. P. Bhandara (R), Rashida Begum (2nd L) and Sujha UI Mulk (L), in New Delhi on Thursday. Thirteen Pakistani legislators are on a "peace and good will mission" to India, to bridge the wide gap between the South Asian rivals.



PHOTO: AFP

A Kashmiri man holds a placard during a march to raise environmental concerns about Dal Lake (in the background) in Srinagar on Friday. The internationally renowned lake has suffered in recent years from pollution from building encroachment and waste discharge.

Norway in fresh bid to revive Lankan talks

AFP, Colombo

Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen was making a fresh bid to salvage Sri Lanka's peace process Friday, a day after his boss failed to end the talks stalemate, diplomats said.

Foreign Minister Jan Petersen left here Friday morning, admitting he failed to persuade the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end their boycott of negotiations but he left behind his deputy to continue the work.

Diplomats said Helgesen was due to travel to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi, 330 kilometres (206 miles) north of here, in a military helicopter for another round of talks to try to jumpstart the stalled peace process.

"He is having a round of talks with Sri Lankan officials and will travel to Kilinochchi later today (Friday)," a diplomatic source here said.

Both Petersen and Helgesen met with LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran Thursday, but there was no breakthrough. They also failed to persuade the Tigers to attend a key donor conference in Japan next month.

Norway, which is spearheading the peace process, and Japan, Sri Lanka's largest aid donor, have urged the Tigers to go to the June 9-10 aid conference in Tokyo to impress the international community of their commitment to peace.

The conference is aimed at drumming up some three billion

dollars in foreign aid to rebuild the war-ravaged nation over a period of three years. But if the Tigers do not take part, diplomats say the donor community would be worried about the stability of the peace process.

"My line of argument was that I think it is important that they go to Tokyo as it will show their commitment to the process to take their case before the international community," Petersen told the BBC Thursday after talks with the Tigers.

"I think they will have quite a lot of explanations to do to the international community if they do not go there. Of course the Tokyo talks would just be a part of the process, but it is a very important part."

Buddha's bones put on display in India

AFP, Patna

The bones of Buddha will go on public display in this northeastern Indian city from Friday, the anniversary of his birth 2,600 years ago, officials said.

Visitors to the Patna Museum will pay 100 rupees (about two dollars) for the privilege of being able to view the priceless Buddhist relic in a specially designed room, museum director Madhuri Aggrawal told reporters Thursday.

"The state government has cleared the proposal to charge 100 rupees from each visitor to see the casket containing the bones of Lord Buddha," she said.

In the past, tourists could view the bones only after obtaining special permission, which involved a long and complicated procedure.

Because the bones are priceless, the museum authorities had been reluctant to display them fearing theft or destruction.

"The room accommodating the bones has been specially lighted and high security has been provided," Aggrawal said.

The Buddha bones were briefly opened for public view on January 12 this year on the occasion of the Tibetan Kalchakra Puja, which attracted hordes of visitors.

The bones were found during the 1958-1962 excavation by noted archaeologist A.S. Altekar of a Buddhist monastery at Vaishali, 35 km from Patna, capital of Bihar state.

China to host global forum on SARS from June 3

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

A senior international symposium on SARS will be held from June 3-4 in Beijing to implement the follow-up measures proposed by the joint declaration reached at a special summit on SARS.

The measures were put forward by China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on April 29, foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said Thursday at a regular press conference.

China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and ASEAN, the so-called 10 plus 3, will attend the event whose theme is to exchange information and experience on prevention and control of SARS.

They will focus on epidemiologic investigation, clinical diagnosis, medicine studies and to seek more international co-operation against the disease, she said.

In addition to the participants from the 10 plus 3, scholars and experts from other countries and regions will also be invited to the event, she added.

China threatens to execute SARS quarantine violators

ANN, Beijing

China upped the stakes in the fight against SARS Thursday after Premier Wen Jiabao backed legislation allowing for the execution or life imprisonment of anyone who violates quarantine and spreads the disease.

The draconian new measures aimed at curbing Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome were revealed as the government again insisted it was bringing the epidemic under control.

"We must heavily stress the importance of using legal methods ... and fully bring into the play legal weapons to win the war in preventing SARS," Wen was quoted by state television as saying.

"Regulations on public health emergencies and the law on infectious diseases are the forceful legal weapons to attack SARS," he said.

Wen's comments came after the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate issued an interpretation on the infectious diseases law that went into effect Thursday with its publication in the Legal Daily.

"Intentionally spreading sudden contagious disease pathogens that endangers public security or leads to serious personal injury, death or heavy loss of public or private property will be punishable

by 10 years to life imprisonment or the death penalty," Xinhua news agency said of the ruling.

The World Health Organisation immediately expressed concern that the law could be counterproductive as it would deter possible SARS patients from going to hospital.

"There is a fine balance with this kind of disease where you need to isolate and quarantine patients, but if you are too heavy handed it may end up only stigmatising people," said WHO spokeswoman Mangai Balasegaram.

The drastic move came as the epidemic showed further signs of abating with the lowest reported number of new cases since the government ended a nearly five-month attempt at covering up the crisis on April 20.

Four new deaths and 52 new cases took the cumulative nationwide tallies to 271 deaths and 5,163 cases.

Beijing, the worst hit city in the world, also recorded its lowest number of new cases (27) since April 20, to take its total to 2,388 and 140 dead.

With the economy taking a beating from SARS, the government has embarked on a mass public campaign aimed at eradicating a disease that is believed to have originated in southern

Guangdong province in November.

The threat of death or jail appears to be part of those measures and came as government officials voiced confidence they could keep the disease from spreading to the countryside.

"The potential risk and transmission routes for SARS spreading to rural areas clearly exist," said Liu Jian, head of the task force of rural affairs for the National SARS Prevention and Control Headquarters.

"However we have taken various and vigorous measures to prevent SARS spreading into the countryside."

China executes more people each year than the rest of the world combined, according to Amnesty International.

The new ruling appeared similar to a July 1999 interpretation of China's criminal law, in which the judiciary determined that vague references in the law to "evil cults" formed the legal basis for a nationwide crackdown on the Falungong spiritual group.

According to the ruling, people with or suspected of carrying contagious diseases, who refuse medical exams, isolation or treatment and pass on the disease unintentionally can be sentenced to between three and seven years.

Mishra briefs

Vajpayee on US, UK visits

AFP, New Delhi

India's national security advisor Brajesh Mishra Friday briefed Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on his talks with American and British officials over peace moves in South Asia, a report said.

Mishra Friday morning reached the Himalayan resort of Manali where Vajpayee is on a week-long holiday, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

Mishra, who is also Vajpayee's principal secretary, briefed the premier about his discussions with US President George W. Bush, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell earlier this month.

While India-US bilateral relations were part of the talks, India's recent offer of talks to Pakistan also figured in the discussions Mishra had with US officials, the report said.

Vajpayee, during a visit to the Indian side of the disputed Kashmir state, on April 18, surprised political observers by offering dialogue with Pakistan for peace in the region.

Chinese mine blast toll rises to 81

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

Eighty-one miners are confirmed dead five remain missing after two days of exhaustive rescue operations following a massive gas blast at a colliery in East China's Anhui Province.

The 28 injured mine workers who made it to safety are receiving hospital treatment, said an official, surnamed Zhang, speaking at the scene yesterday.

A total of 114 miners were working underground when an explosion ripped through the Luling Coal Mine, operated by Huaibei Mining Group on Tuesday afternoon.

Nineteen of the injured were taken to the hospital affiliated to the mine, said a doctor surnamed Xing with the hospital.

"Most of the patients here are in a stable condition, except for one, who suffered comparatively severe burns," he said.

The remainder, who suffered more serious injuries are being treated at the general hospital affiliated to the Huaibei Mining Group.

Lin, a doctor with the general hospital, told reporters that those victims had suffered 50 per cent body surface burns and fractures and were on the critical list.

A series of measures has been taken to ensure the on-going rescue, said Zhang, the mine official.



PHOTO: AFP

Sofyan Ibrahim Tiba (C), a senior delegate of the separatist rebels Free Aceh Movement (GAM), moves to a police car after being detained in Banda Aceh on Friday with other GAM delegates while heading to the airport to fly to Tokyo for peace talks. GAM said they will boycott last-ditch peace talks with the Indonesian government in Tokyo unless police in the province free five rebel delegates arrested earlier in the day.

Bush, Roh won't tolerate nuclear North Korea

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush and South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun warned they would "not tolerate" nuclear weapons in North Korea as they forged a public display of unity in their first-ever summit.

Bush moved to assuage fears of a US military response to the show-down with his "axis of evil" foe, but neither side laid out in detail how they proposed to thwart the communist state's drive for nuclear weapons.

The US side also promised to retain a "robust forward presence" on the Korean peninsula, but signalled it would try to ease the

burden on the South Korean people posed by its 37,000 strong garrison.

"I assured the president we will continue to work to achieve a peaceful solution," Bush said Wednesday in a symbolic joint appearance with Roh in the White House Rose Garden.

He cited "good progress" being made towards ending the crisis, despite inconclusive US talks with the Stalinist state last month also involving China.

Roh insists that military force should not be an option in the drama, but the US administration, though preferring diplomacy, says all options remain on the table.

Bush says no deals can be made with Pyongyang until it renounces the nuclear drive.

In a statement, Bush and Roh tried to frustrate Pyongyang's traditional tactic of probing divisions in the US-South Korea alliance.

"President Roh and President Bush reaffirmed they would not tolerate nuclear weapons in North Korea," the statement said.

"Both leaders reiterated their strong commitment to work for the complete, verifiable and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program through peaceful means," the statement said.