

Agra peace bid was India's genuine try: Musharraf

Both nations need to compromise on Kashmir: Advani

PTI, New Delhi

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf was on Saturday night dismissive of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Lahore bus trip to normalise relations with his country even while terming his (Vajpayee's) Agra initiative as a "genuine try".

He said he believed Vajpayee was a "man of peace" and the two leaders had almost reached an agreement at Agra Summit talks in 2001.

"The invitation to Agra was a genuine try (of Vajpayee to resolve the disputes). However, the first try - the Lahore bus trip -- was not a try at all because he was not ready to resolve issues at that time," Musharraf said in an interview to NDTV.

Recalling his meeting with Vajpayee at Agra, Musharraf said, "we had drafted the Agra

Declaration. I believe he (Vajpayee) is a man of peace. Our thoughts are similar on peace."

On reports that he as Army chief had refused to receive Vajpayee on his Lahore trip in February 1999, the Pakistani leader dismissed it as misconception and said, "I welcomed him at the airport. I was the first to shake his hand. I did not go to Wagah because I was in uniform."

Asked whether converting Indo-Pak border into a soft border was a possibility, he agreed, saying "people-to-people contact was necessary."

"But it cannot solve the problem, although it can be a way forward," Musharraf said.

He said Kashmir was not standing in the way of improving economic situation and removing poverty in Pakistan even during the "maximum confrontation" with India.

"Poverty has declined in

Pakistan recently," he claimed.

Meanwhile, asserting that India was not satisfied with Pakistan's response to its peace initiative, Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani on Saturday said in New York that the Kashmir issue could be resolved but would require "some kind of compromises" from both sides on "extreme positions" taken by them.

"The moment talks start (between India and Pakistan) after conducive atmosphere is created, India is ready to discuss all issues, including Kashmir on which both sides have extreme and different positions," Advani said in an interview in New York.

He maintained that even the "most contentious issues" across the world have been resolved through dialogue.

"It is not impossible and beyond ingenuity of the two countries to resolve the issue. But it would

require some kind of compromises from both sides on extreme positions they have taken," he said.

Asked whether India was satisfied that Pakistan was doing enough to create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue, Advani said "although while here, I do not want to be seen as pointing fingers, we are not satisfied as yet with the response."

"While I have been here, I have been getting reports of repeated efforts of infiltration which have been frustrated by our security forces," he said.

To a question, the Deputy Prime Minister said he had "no doubt that Pakistan is in control" of terrorist organisations.

"It is not that the terrorist organisations are doing something on their own. There is a full-fledged infrastructure of terrorism that has been built up (in Pakistan) over the years," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers being ferried across floodwaters as rainfall continues in Rangia, some 57 km west of Guwahati on Sunday. Flashfloods triggered by heavy monsoon rains have left at least 150,000 people homeless in India's northeastern state of Assam.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (L) is greeted by his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri at the foreign ministry in Islamabad on Sunday. Ivanov arrived in Pakistan for talks with government leaders on bilateral ties, regional issues including Afghanistan, Pakistan-India peace efforts and post-war Iraq, officials said.

'Yangon working on to set Suu Kyi free'

AFP, Phnom Penh

Myanmar's Foreign Minister Win Aung said Sunday the events of May 30, when democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was detained after violent clashes, were "very, very unfortunate" and his government is working towards the release of the opposition leader.

"We are working on that, even though I cannot say how soon, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow or like that," he said when asked whether the Nobel peace laureate would be released from "protective custody".

Aung San Suu Kyi was placed in "protective custody" after the clashes between her supporters and a junta-backed mob that left dozens dead.

Speaking before the beginning of a series of meetings this week sponsored by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Win Aung said there were "some spectres who did not want to see national reconciliation move ahead smoothly".

"What we can assure you of is

that we are working on that to bring the situation back to normal and the police inquest is still going on," Win Aung told reporters after meeting with his Cambodian counterpart Hor Namhong.

"What happened on the 30th of May was very unfortunate and we are working very, very hard for our national reconciliation process," Win Aung said.

These included militant monks and some youths who he described as "rowdy" and were responsible for the clashes.

ASEAN groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Upcoming meetings include the ASEAN Regional Forum where Myanmar is expected to face international opposition to the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The ARF includes ASEAN security dialogue partners like Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Russia, the United States and the European Union.

Flood situation worsens in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

The flood situation in India's northeastern state of Assam worsened Sunday with more than 200,000 people left homeless due to heavy monsoon rains lashing the region, officials said.

Rising waters have wrought havoc in the western Nalbari and southern Karimganj districts overnight, while the situation in the southern Hailakandi and eastern Dhemaj districts was still "grim," Assam Flood Control Minister Nurzamal Sarkar told AFP.

In all, about 260 villages had been affected in the floods that began Thursday, officials said.

The Assam government sounded a maximum alert as the main Brahmaputra river was threatening to breach scores of mud embankments in at least 10 other districts.

A Central Water Commission bulletin on Sunday said the Brahmaputra was rising all along its course, with eight of its major tributaries flowing above the danger level at various places.

Vajpayee's China trip may redraw diplomatic map

PTI, Beijing

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's upcoming visit to China will be a new milestone that will pave way for strengthened Sino-Indian relations, key to peace and security in Asia, former Chinese ambassador to India, Cheng Ruisheng said here Sunday.

"As a farsighted pioneer in restoring normal Sino-Indian relations in 1979 and a senior statesman of the world today, Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China will certainly be a new milestone in further developing the relations in an overall way," Cheng told PTI in an interview.

Vajpayee is scheduled to pay an official visit to China from June 22 to 27, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in almost a decade. He is visiting China as the guest of his new Chinese counterpart, Wen

Jiabao.

Noting that Vajpayee's visit is taking place after the new Chinese leaders assumed power in Beijing, Cheng also a member of the India-China Eminent Persons Group (EPG) said, "The visit will also initiate a new round of exchange of visits at a high level." During his visit, Vajpayee will hold official talks with Wen and will have separate meetings with Chinese president Hu Jintao, chairman of the Central Military Commission, Jiang Zemin, Chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress, Wu Bangguo and Vice President Zeng Qinghong.

"The Chinese and Indian sides attach great importance to the visit by Prime Minister Vajpayee. The two sides are actively preparing for it and hope that it will be a success," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Kong Qian said.

"The Chinese and Indian leaders will exchange views on international and regional issues during the visit. It is believed that both sides will reaffirm their commitment to peace, stability and development in the region," Kong said.

"We are encouraged by the current developments of the Sino-Indian relations," he said adding the relations between the two neighbouring countries have been rapidly developed recently.

Meanwhile, official sources said a number of agreements are expected to be signed during the six-day visit spanning three Chinese cities of Beijing, Luoyang and Shanghai.

A high level delegation of Indian business and industry will visit China in conjunction with the Prime Minister's visit. Vajpayee will address a joint India-China business meeting in Beijing.

Lankan peace in limbo

Tigers warn of 'grave consequences' after ship sinking

AFP, Colombo

The sinking of a Tamil rebel ship and a string of political slayings have raised fears that Sri Lanka may be slipping back to war as its peace bid remains deadlocked, analysts and diplomats said Sunday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) warned of "grave consequences" following Saturday's sinking of one of their merchant vessels that also left the fate of the 12-member crew in doubt.

"...if any harm were to befall the crew of the LTTE vessel then the sole responsibility for the events lie with the Sri Lanka Navy and this incident would have very grave consequences," the LTTE said.

The sea has proved a flashpoint for Tamil Tigers and government forces who entered into a Norwegian-brokered truce on February 23 last year as the ceasefire does not extend fully to activities at sea.

The Tigers rebels have a ferocious sea-going capability which includes suicide bombers. In February three guerrillas blew themselves up and took down their boat loaded with an anti-aircraft gun rather than be arrested by the navy.

Despite the ceasefire, the Tigers have also been accused of carrying out a string of attacks against military informants and rival political activists. At least 30 killings have been blamed on the Tigers during the truce.

On Saturday, a top leader of a rival Tamil group was shot dead in the northern peninsula of Jaffna -- the most senior politician to have been killed during the truce.

On April 21 the Tigers announced they were suspending their participation in peace talks and boycotting an aid pledging conference in Tokyo because the government had failed to deliver on its promises.

The privately-run Sunday Island newspaper in an editorial headlined "Danger signals" said recent events suggested the Tigers were heading for a resumption of war.

The paper noted that the LTTE was against the government's policy of winning an "international safety net" while talking with the rebels. Four previous peace bids ended in failure and more bloodshed.

The paper called for greater Indian support to Sri Lanka in case of fresh fighting.

"While she (India) has been most helpful in recent years in many matters, more substantial assistance may become necessary if the Tigers are heading for a resumption of war as many believe they are," the Sunday Island said.

A day before the latest upsurge in violence, President Chandrika Kumaratunga's party warned that the country could be slipping back to war.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), which sits as the opposition in parliament, said it wanted the cohabitation government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to ensure that security forces were capable of meeting any threat.

Diplomatic sources said they did not expect an immediate outbreak of hostilities, but it would be a challenge for the Norwegian peace brokers to bring the Tigers onboard and resume talks.

Both the Colombo government and its international backers had expected that pledges of millions of dollars to rebuild embattled northern and eastern regions made at the aid conference in Tokyo last week would woo the Tigers back to the table.

Clarion call for pre-marital AIDS test

AFP, Guwahati

Twenty-seven-year old Jahnabi Goswami has a personal reason for campaigning to make pre-marital AIDS tests mandatory -- she was infected with HIV by her husband soon after they married.

"In India, a majority of parents visit astrologers with horoscopes of the bride and the groom to find out if the couple will stay happy after marriage," Goswami, a resident of the northeastern state of Assam, told AFP.

"But from my personal experience, instead of matching horoscopes, it would be wise if the couple go for a blood test to rule out being HIV-positive."



PHOTO: AFP

HIV positive Indian woman Jahnabi Goswami looks through a window in Guwahati on June 13. Goswami is leading a campaign to have pre-marital AIDS tests made mandatory. She was infected with the virus by her husband who died in 1996, and now works as a counsellor with the AIDS Control Society in Assam.

New governor of Kashmir to work for peace

AFP, New Delhi

The new governor of Indian Kashmir has said he will work for the early restoration of peace in the troubled Himalayan region where thousands of people have been killed in a 14-year Islamic insurgency.

In an interview with the Hindustan Times newspaper published Sunday, S.K. Sinha, a retired general who was vice chief of the Indian army, said he would "contribute towards restoration of peace by winning the confidence of the people."

Sinha, who was appointed by New Delhi in May to the ceremonial post, said he would also draw on his experiences in the army and his previous job as governor of the insurgency-wracked northeastern state of Assam for six years.

But he said the militancy affecting Assam and Kashmir was very different.

"Here (in Kashmir) the dimension of violence and of foreign involvement is much greater. Kashmir is a major international issue and one of the hotspots of the world.

Peace still eludes Koreas 3 years after summit

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The reconnection of cross-border railways Saturday was supposed to be a crowning moment for inter-Korean reconciliation spurred by the historic summit three years ago.

But the ceremonies were merely symbolic and low-key. Trains will not run for some time as the construction work has been delayed due to diplomatic friction.

Seoul had declined Pyongyang's proposal for a large-scale celebration, considering the tense mood over the standoff sparked by the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Three years after the first-ever summit June 15, 2000, the reconciliation between the two Koreas faces a row of hurdles as Seoul and its allies are stepping up pressure on the North to give up its suspected atomic weapons programme.