



President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai (L) gestures as he walks with Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali (2-L) during a guard of honour ceremony at the Presidential Place in Kabul yesterday. After meeting with Karzai, Jamali, who is on a one-day visit to the Afghan capital, told reporters that the two countries would fight terrorism "hand in hand".

'India to finalise date for resuming talks with Pakistan soon'

PTI, Hyderabad

India will soon finalise the dates for resuming the composite dialogue with Pakistan, besides the level and the venue of the talks, External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said yesterday.

"This (the level of the talks) is something which will have to be mutually decided. We will consult the Government of Pakistan over the next few days and weeks. We will fix a date, we will fix the level, we will fix the venue. We will fix how the talks should proceed," Sinha told reporters.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf on Saturday said that the two countries have agreed on a "step by step approach" under which there would be "three crucial foreign secretary-level rounds of talks" beginning next month.

On reports that National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra and his Pakistani counterpart,

Tariq Aziz will be appointed special envoys to speed up the process, Sinha said, "No decision has been taken as yet," while observing that all these things "still have to be determined".

On the BJP cautioning the NDA Government, he said the party had congratulated the Prime Minister for the breakthrough that he achieved in "very uncertain circumstances" during his trip to Islamabad.

ANI adds: Keen to stymie the negative impact of the two assassination attempts on President Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistan government is likely to ban more jihadi groups.

Informed intelligence sources told the Daily Times that for a start a ban could be imposed on the Harkatul Jihad-e-Islami (HJI) and the Jamaatul Mujahideen (JM) on the basis of evidence that they were involved in the suicide attacks of December 14 and 25.

Israel threatens unilateral move

Palestinians slam Tel Aviv's 'disengagement' plan

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will start to implement its own unilateral measures in about six months time if no bilateral agreement is reached by then with the Palestinians, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said yesterday.

"In my estimation, by the month of June our preparations for major unilateral moves will be complete... and this plan, including withdrawal from certain settlements, will begin to be implemented by the second half of the year," he told the English language Jerusalem Post daily.

Olmert, who is also trade minister in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's coalition government, said he would prefer to reach agreement with the Palestinians under the framework of the roadmap peace

plan, but cast doubt on whether any deal could be reached with Palestinian premier Ahmed Qorei.

"Abu Alaa (Qorei) is unable or does not want to take the minimum steps needed to create the basis for real political negotiations," he said.

Sharon told journalists late Sunday that he remained committed to a bilateral peace agreement under the terms of the US-backed roadmap, which has completely stalled with top level talks frozen for nearly five months.

But he also warned that if agreement was not possible with the Palestinians he would implement his own "unilateral measures" as part of what he has termed a disengagement plan which is likely to see Israel evacuate a small number of settlements but strengthen its control over others.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority condemned as a threat to regional peace the "disengagement" plan which Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Monday was six months down the road.

"This Israeli threat is not only aimed at the Palestinians but also at the roadmap drafted by the quartet," Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's top adviser Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

The "roadmap" blueprint was drafted by the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia. It was endorsed by both sides last June.

It calls for an end to violence and the evacuation of Jewish settlement outposts as steps towards the creation of an independent Palestinian state by 2005.

National polls to be held 'at the earliest': Vajpayee

AFP, Hyderabad

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday said parliamentary polls would be held "at the earliest" opportunity after his ruling Hindu nationalists backed a campaign to bring the vote forwards.

"Now that the party has passed a resolution, I will ask (Finance Minister) Jaswant Singh to take a vote on account (interim budget) and go to elections at the earliest," Vajpayee told members of his nationalist BJP party in the southern city of Hyderabad.

After the resolution was passed, BJP party spokesman Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi quoted Vajpayee as saying, "It would be good if elections are over by April."

The party resolution, which called for the holding of elections ahead of the September 30 deadline, was debated by top leaders of

Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and passed unanimously, party sources said.

Bouyed by wins in recent provincial polls, economic growth of over eight percent and peace moves with arch-rival Pakistan, the BJP has been mulling the idea of advancing the date of polls.

A BJP source said last week the party would urge the prime minister to dissolve parliament soon and hold polls as early as March.

Last week, partners of Vajpayee's BJP party in the BJP-led ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) -- grouping around 20 legislative allies -- voted to give a free hand to the prime minister to decide the dates.

According to analysts, the BJP is within its limits seeking national polls months before September 30.

Armed with his party's go-ahead for early polls, Vajpayee will

now convene a cabinet meeting to pass a resolution recommending the dissolution of the lower house of parliament, the BJP source said.

Parliament would then meet for a day or two to pass an interim budget. The president would then formally dissolve the house on the advice of the prime minister, the source said.

However, the decision on when and how to hold the polls rests with India's autonomous election commission, according to India's constitution.

The three-man panel, headed by Chief Election Commissioner James Michael Lyngdoh, held some preliminary meetings late last week to get the poll machinery into gear.

Subjects reviewed during the election panel's deliberations were security, mobilising staff for organising and monitoring the polls and a revision of electoral rolls.

India, China start new round of talks on border dispute

AFP, Beijing

Indian and Chinese negotiators were meeting in Beijing yesterday for a new round of talks aimed at resolving the ongoing border dispute between the nuclear neighbours, officials said.

India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra arrived Sunday for the two days of dialogue and was meeting Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo.

"He is in town and having discussions with his counterpart," said P.K. Rawat, a spokesman at the Indian embassy.

Mishra, who is the representative of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on the border issue, is also expected to call on some senior Chinese leaders and exchange views on bilateral ties as well as other issues of common concern.

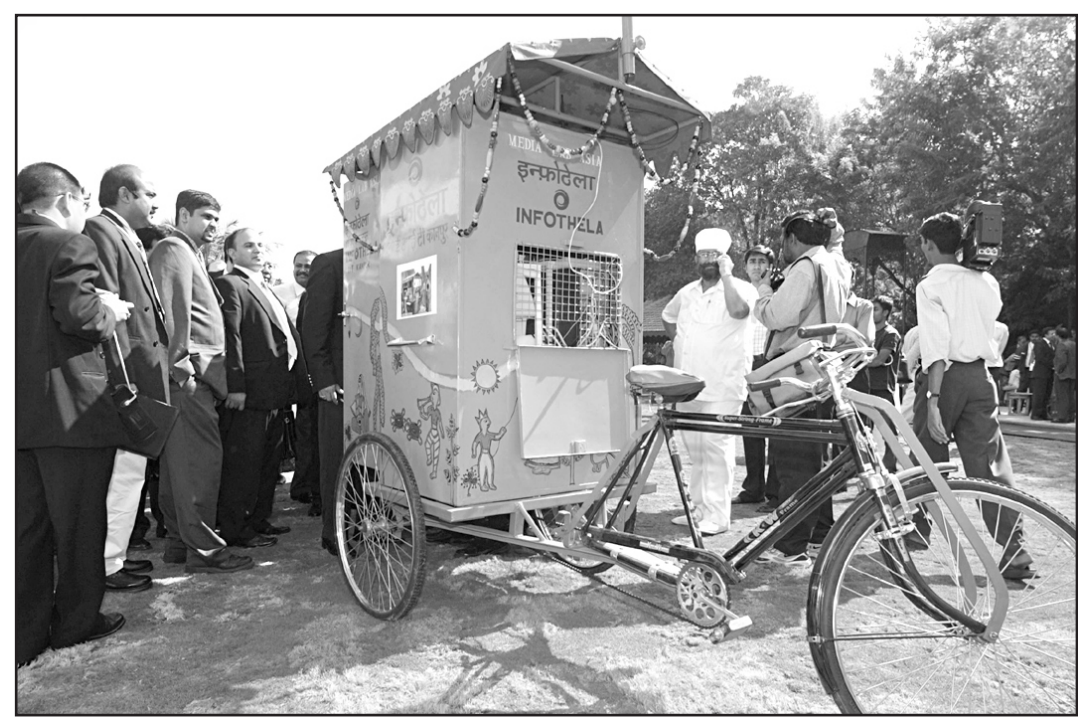
A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said last week Beijing hoped

progress would result from Mishra's visit.

"We hope that against the backdrop of the continuous development of Sino-Indian relations, the two sides' representatives will... actively inquire into and solve the border issues between the two countries," spokesman Kong Quan said at a regular briefing.

The talks follow a round of dialogue in October in New Delhi. Moves to resolve the border dispute gained momentum after Vajpayee visited Beijing in June.

India accuses China of occupying 38,000 square kilometres (14,670 square miles) of territory in Kashmir while Beijing lays claim to 90,000 square kilometres (34,750 square miles) -- all of Arunachal Pradesh state, the scene of the war between the two. During Vajpayee's talks in Beijing, the two sides agreed to reopen the Nathu La Pass between Chinese-ruled Tibet and Sikkim, a former protectorate which New Delhi annexed in 1975.



Delegates crowd around the "Infothela" -- information cart, at the venue of the "Asia IT Ministers, 2nd Summit" in Hyderabad yesterday. The Infothela -- developed by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, is a mobile Internet and information kiosk on a tricycle with pedal-powered generator aimed to spread Internet awareness in far-flung villages of India. Ministers, CEOs and industry experts from over 45 countries are participating in the two-day long summit set to discuss "Bridging the Digital Divide, Standardisation and IT Development in Asia".

Saudis hit back at Perle's 'axis of evil' jibe

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia angrily rejected yesterday a "tendentious" campaign led by US hawks after an advisor to Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld lumped the kingdom in the "axis of evil."

State-monitored media led the charge warning that Washington's own interests were being damaged.

Rumsfeld aide Richard Perle told CNN on Sunday: "The Saudis qualify for their own membership in the axis of evil," which President George W. Bush described as Iran, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and North Korea.

"I hope that those who believe that we are now getting full cooperation are right," he added, referring to Saudi Arabia's role in the war on terror following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

"I have yet to see the evidence," Perle charged in the latest assault on the kingdom by influential US neo-conservatives.

Turki al-Faisal, a former Saudi intelligence service chief and today ambassador in London, branded Perle a "Zionist extremist".

The envoy told the Al-Hayat newspaper that Perle "has predicted the disintegration of Saudi Arabia and expressed his own point of view much more than that of Washington."

"People have been talking about the disintegration of Arabia and the overthrow of its regime since the kingdom was created in 1932," said Prince Turki, a senior figure in the royal family.

Saudi Arabia owed its existence to "God, followed by its faithful people," he added.

The Okaz newspaper set the tone of the riposte in the media, which generally reflects official Saudi thinking.

"The hawks stubbornly follow the same political line they laid out for this administration to impose their hegemony over the world and not to lead it," it said.

Pakistan heading for civil war, says Sharif

ANI, Lahore

Pakistan's former prime minister Nawaz Sharif has warned the people that the government is pushing the country towards civil war under pressure from its "foreign masters."

"The rulers have put the country's stability at stake to save their power. There would be no guarantee for the sovereignty of Pakistan until the current rulers are removed," Daily Times quoted Sharif as telling Rashid, a PML-N leader, over the phone.

Urging all political parties to take note of the "ruler's illegal and unconstitutional activities," Sharif said that tyranny always promoted clashes, not peace.

"The rulers should take tribal leaders into confidence instead of threatening them. Illegal activities of foreign agencies in Pakistan are a matter of great concern and it is the responsibility of political parties to protest the unconstitutional acts of the rulers," he said.

N Korea urges US to accept nuke freeze

AP, Seoul

A day after showing American delegates its "nuclear deterrent," North Korea marked the anniversary of its withdrawal from an international nuclear treaty by resolving to bolster its defenses against a possible US attack.

Yet as the communist North kept up its typically harsh anti-American rhetoric on Sunday, North Korea's official KCNA news agency also urged Washington to accept Pyongyang's offer of a freeze on its program as a first step toward resolving the crisis over its atomic weapons programs.

The American delegates arrived in Seoul on Sunday after a visit to the North in which officials reportedly showed them recently reprocessed plutonium -- the fuel for atomic bombs -- to convey the extent of development and what might be curbed if the programs were suspended. The five delegates were the first outside visitors to the Yongbyon nuclear plant since Pyongyang expelled UN inspectors a year ago.

International and domestic pressure is mounting for the Bush administration to accept the North's offer of a freeze as a compromise to rekindle six-nation talks on the nuclear standoff.

While previously rejecting such offers, the United States against the backdrop of the delegation's visit called Pyongyang's latest proposal a "positive step forward." South Korea hailed the plan as creating "atmosphere" for new negotiations.

Meanwhile, Russia and China were working to broker a compromise that reportedly calls for a freeze as a first step toward resuming six-nation talks on the Korean crisis. Chinese diplomats are expected to float such a proposal next week in Washington, according to Russia's Itar-Tass news agency.

The American delegation has said it was shown everything it asked to see at North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility, but delegates would not give details until they had briefed superiors in Washington.

Spanish FM, Bremer talk trial of Saddam

AFP, Baghdad

Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio held talks with US overseer Paul Bremer yesterday, discussing the future trial of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein and progress in rebuilding Iraq.

"We share the desire to make the reconstruction process of Iraq as quick and as successful as possible," Palacio told reporters in Baghdad, during a two-day trip in which she also visited Spain's 300-strong troop deployment to Iraq.

The minister said she had witnessed signs the insurgency-ravaged country was getting back on its feet, during her trip from the Spanish base near the southern town of Diwaniya to the Iraqi capital.

US takes credit for thaw in Indo-Pak ties

PTI, Washington

Describing the decision by India and Pakistan to resume composite dialogue as "historic", US Secretary of State Colin Powell has said the breakthrough was the result of two years of work by his country and it had offered its "good offices" to further improve their relations.

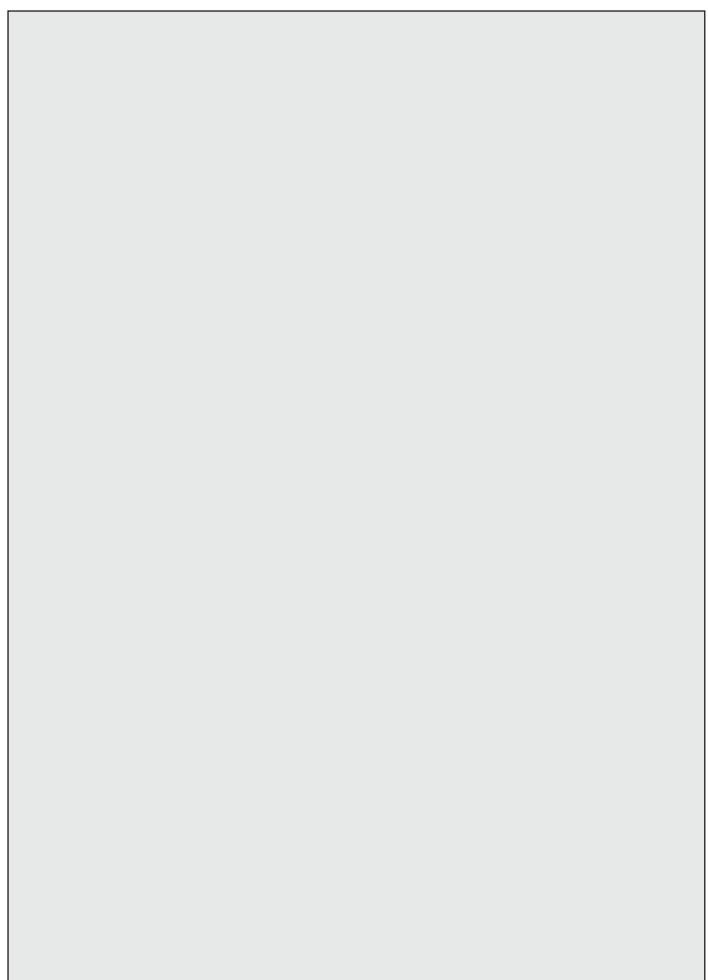
"The work we have been doing with the Indians and the Pakistanis" produced a breakthrough over the last several days "but there is more work to be done, and we have offered our good offices to the Indians and the Pakistanis over the last couple of days," Powell said in an interview to the US News and World Report during the weekend.

"We have been working with

the Indians and the Pakistanis for almost two years, from a period of 'We're going to nuclear war this weekend' to, you know, this is a historic change. And so I think a lot of these seeds that were planted are now germinating and you'll (see) us harvesting crops," he added.

During the Saarc Summit in Islamabad, India and Pakistan decided to resume composite dialogue on all outstanding issues, including Jammu and Kashmir.

Powell expressed satisfaction with the "good job" being done by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in the face of a difficult domestic political situation and said he was concerned for Musharraf's safety after two attacks on him.



A student wearing a mask holds a banner against US President George W. Bush Sunday in Monterrey during a protest rally against the Special Summit of the Americas. Thirty-four heads of state and government from across the Americas are gathering here for a two-day summit which started yesterday.

Pak court frees 2 French journalists

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani court yesterday freed two French journalists who had been given six-month jail terms at the weekend for violating the country's visa regulations.

Reporter Marc Epstein and photographer Jean-Paul Guilloteau of the French weekly L'Express, who had been jailed on Saturday, were released after an appeal hearing at Karachi's provincial high court.

A fine of 100,000 rupees (1,725 dollars/1,350 euros) made against each man was instead doubled to 200,000 rupees by Judge Zawar Hussain Jaffery.

The two men will be free to leave Pakistan as soon as the fines are paid.

"Since the state did not oppose the appeal for reduction in the sentence, they are free to go as soon as they pay the fine," Jaffery said.

"No purpose will be served by keeping them in prison in Pakistan."

Jaffery said the journalists could not be acquitted because they had pleaded guilty and admitted they had gone to the southwestern city of Quetta, bordering Afghanistan, in violation of their visas.