

An unidentified elderly Pakistani woman (R) reaches out to her relatives as she bids goodbye from her compartment on the Samjhota Express at Lahore Railway Station yesterday prior to the train's departure for India. Rail links between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan resumed yesterday after a two-year gap, with the departure from Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore of an India-bound train.

'No foreign pressure in Indo-Pak peace move'

Jamali eyes talks on Kashmir next month

AFP/ANI, New Delhi/Islamabad

Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha has denied there was pressure from any other country, which helped the recent breakthrough between arch-rivals India and Pakistan during talks in Islamabad.

"When (Atal Behari) Vajpayee offered his hand of friendship to Pakistan in April last year, it took the whole world by surprise," Sinha told the Financial Times newspaper in an interview.

"People in India and Pakistan would not like to think this (peace process) was the result of any third party pressure -- and it is not even true."

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf met on the sidelines of a regional summit in

Islamabad earlier this month and decided to restart stalled bilateral talks on all disputes including Kashmir from February.

The meeting came eight months after Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan, thawing months of chill between the two South Asian nuclear rivals.

A slew of reciprocal peace initiatives have since been announced by both sides including a November ceasefire along the disputed Kashmir border.

On Thursday, a passenger train between the two countries resumed service after a gap of two years.

The historic success came after two years of unending relations following a militant attack on India's parliament in December 2001 that brought the two countries close to

war. Conflict was averted after months of intense western diplomacy by the United States.

On Tuesday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell claimed credit for the peace process.

"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," Powell told the US News and World Report, according to the Press Trust of India (PTI).

"And so I think a lot of these seeds that were planted are now germinating and you'll see us harvesting crops."

Pakistan Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali too hinted that "some countries" had helped in the process but refused to divulge the

names.

ANI adds: Pakistan Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali Wednesday said that Indo-Pak talks on Kashmir and other issues could be held next month.

He was talking with newsmen in Beto Jatoi in Dadu. The News also quoted him as saying that people involved in the suicide attacks on President Musharraf would be brought to justice.

Commenting on his recent visit to Afghanistan he said he expected it to result in better ties between the two countries.

He also expressed confidence about his government completing its five-year tenure. Replying to another question, he said the Khokhrap border crossing would be opened soon.

South Korea's FM resigns

AP, Seoul

South Korea's foreign minister resigned yesterday, a day after President Roh Moo-hyun accused ministry officials of criticising his foreign policy.

Roh accepted Yoon Young-kwan's resignation, saying the Foreign Ministry was not fully backing his administration's policy of "independence" from Washington. Roh took office a year ago promising to stand up on equal footing with South Korea's top ally.

Roh's office did not say who would replace Yoon.

The resignation comes at a critical juncture as South Korea and the United States wrangle with North Korea over its nuclear weapons programs and discuss sending South Korean troops to help the US-led coalition in Iraq.

Yoon said at a news conference there were "some differences in perspective" between members of his staff and members of Roh's National Security Council.

He said the Foreign Ministry should serve to implement the president's policy. He acknowledged people were concerned about remarks reportedly made by his officials and said he took the dispute "heavily" and was "sincerely sorry."

Kashmiri militants name team for talks with Delhi

AFP, Srinagar

Amid fresh violence and opposition by hardliners, Indian Kashmir's main separatist alliance yesterday named a team for high-level talks with New Delhi and said it favours involvement of rebels in future dialogue.

The team will be headed by Maulana Abbas Ansari, the head of the moderate faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, former Hurriyat chief Abdul Gani Bhat told reporters here.

Ansari this week received a formal invitation for talks on the future of Kashmir in New Delhi on January 22 with Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani.

Besides Bhat and Ansari, other members of the team are Hurriyat founder Umar Farooq, Bilal Lone, the son of assassinated moderate separatist Abdul Gani Lone, and

Fazal Haque Qureshi.

Qureshi had facilitated talks between India and the members of the dominant rebel group Hizbul Mujahedin in July 2000 after Hizbul called for a unilateral ceasefire that was reciprocated by New Delhi.

However, the ceasefire was called off by Hizbul within a fortnight.

Bhat, speaking at the end of a Hurriyat meeting at their Srinagar headquarters, said he was cautiously optimistic about the talks.

"If you take a right step in the right direction in the very first meeting you reach your goal. If anything goes wrong you probably cannot think of reaching the goal," he said.

Bhat said Hurriyat favoured involvement of militants in the talks.

"We would like our boys (militants) also to be associated with the process," said Bhat. "For that we will need to undertake a visit to Pakistan.

We will take it up with the government of India (too)."

Similar pleas have been spurned by India in the past.

Hardliners, who in September expressed no confidence in the moderate leadership of Ansari and named Syed Ali Geelani as their leader, have opposed the talks while a militant group Jamiat-ul-Mujahedin has warned Ansari and his colleagues of a "bad end" if they bow to New Delhi.

On Thursday, the Jihad Council, a group of over a dozen rebel groups active in Kashmir, said the moderate faction had no mandate for talks from the people and the rebels.

"It is a lot that has been rejected both by the people and the freedom fighters active in the field," council spokesman Sadaqat Hussain was quoted as saying by a local news agency.

Process of removing heavy weapons from Kabul begins

AFP, Kabul

The first removal of heavy weapons from the war-weary Afghan capital, Kabul, began yesterday with the collection of arms from thousands of local militiamen, as the city takes another step towards peace.

A spokesman for the ministry refused to reveal how many weapons the operation was hoping to net, but confirmed that heavy weapons would be picked up from four or five locations in the city.

"It is a significant step towards securing and stabilising the capital," Defense Ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi told AFP.

"This is separate from the DDR programme," he said in reference to the United Nations' disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration campaign to collect the weapons of some 100,000 militiamen scattered throughout the country.



Canadian soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) talk together in front of heavy weapons collected from thousands of local militiamen in Kabul yesterday. Afghanistan's disarmament process has begun under three separate programmes with the primary one being the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) project being run by the United Nations in conjunction with the ministry of defence. This programme has started pilot projects in several cities and aims to disarm some 100,000 militiamen nationwide.

'India to play role in US moon mission'

AFP, Bangalore

India, which aims to send an unmanned mission to the moon by 2008, will take part in US plans to send humans back to the moon and eventually to Mars, the Indian space agency chief said yesterday.

President George W. Bush unveiled plans Wednesday for a US return to the moon as early as 2015, saying a lunar base would be a launch pad for manned missions to Mars and "across our solar system."

"India will certainly participate in the US initiative because we don't want to lag behind in the exploration of space," Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman Madhavan Nair told AFP. But he said the extent of India's role had still to be determined.

"We'll firm up our plans for space exploration after bilateral discussions with them," he said in the southern city of Bangalore where the space agency is based. "Our role will depend on the progress of the dialogue with the US."

Focus on Gujarat violence, caste system at world youth forum

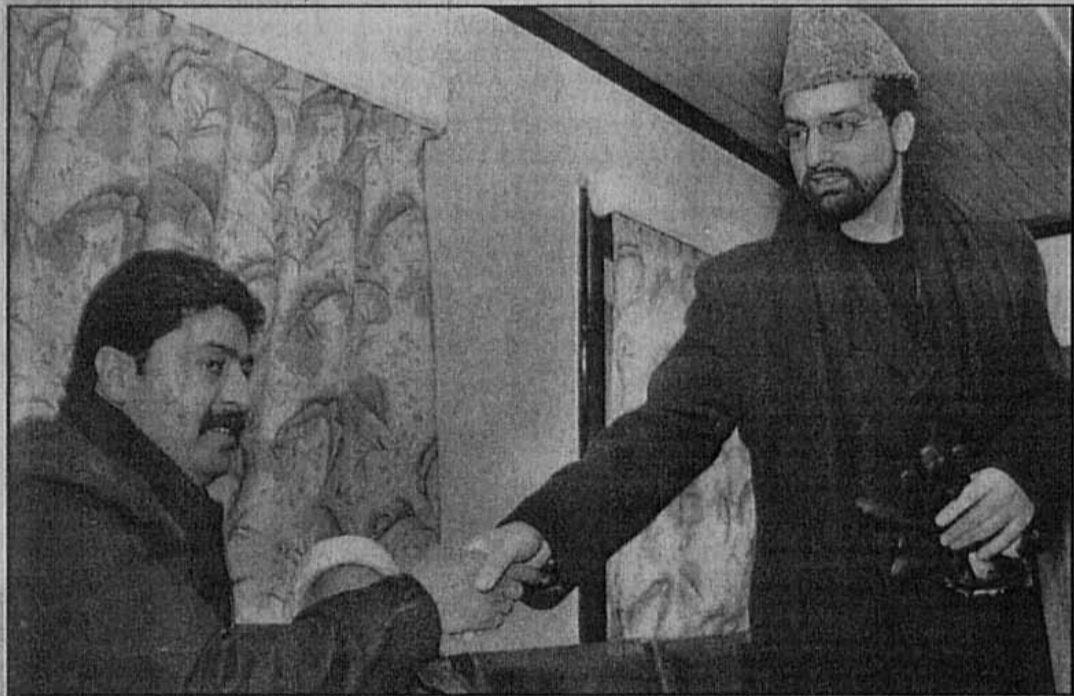
AFP, Mumbai

Thousands of young people will bring India's recent communal violence in Gujarat and the country's rigid caste system to centre stage at a youth forum on the sidelines of the world's top anti-globalisation meeting.

More than 10,000 young men and women will participate in the youth forum from January 16 to 21, with half of them camping out in tents on the grass of a prestigious private school in the heart of the metropolis, organisers said.

The youth get-together is held concurrently under the umbrella of the World Social Forum, the annual convention of anti-globalisation forces that will feature panels, rallies and concerts for a host of causes.

"Gujarat violence and India's caste system will be the key issues taking centre stage at our forum," said Alex Payne, 26, a social activist from London.



Former Chairman of Indian administered Kashmir's main separatist alliance the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and chief cleric of Kashmir Moulvi Umar Farooq (R) shakes hands with senior separatist leader Bilal Lone (L) prior to a meeting at the APHC headquarter in Srinagar yesterday. The moderate faction of Kashmir's main separatist alliance named its team to next week's first-ever high-level talks with India, a separatist leader said.

Catholic church torched in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

A Roman Catholic church was set on fire near the Sri Lankan capital Colombo yesterday amid mounting inter-religious tension in this Buddhist majority island, police said.

The St. Michael's church at Katuwana, about 25km east of here, was attacked by an unidentified group of people who broke into the premises, destroyed statues and then set fire to the building, police and church members said.

A police spokesman in the area said an investigation was underway and no arrests had been made.

Church member Dion de Silva said damage to property alone was estimated around half a million rupees (5,000 dollars). The statues and crosses had been destroyed.

'Big drop in infiltration into Kashmir'

AFP, New Delhi

Rebel infiltration into Indian Kashmir on the disputed border with Pakistan has dropped significantly, Indian army chief General N.C. Vij said Wednesday.

"Infiltration has gone down, but that is largely due to climate," General Vij told the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

He added that fewer rebels were entering Kashmir as India had put more troops and had improved technology along the 760-kilometer (471-mile) Line of Control (LoC) that divides the Indian and Pakistani-controlled zones of the Himalayan region.

"These (steps) include mounting effective surveillance on all

known routes of infiltration, deployment of ground sensors, construction of an effective fence along the LoC and multi-tiered positioning of troops," said Vij.

According to Lieutenant General Hari Prasad, who heads the Indian army's Northern Command that includes Kashmir, Indian troops in the past six months made 93 intercepts on the de facto border killing 300 militants.

He did not give comparative figures for other time periods.

The army says between 2,500 to 3,000 militants are active inside Indian Kashmir, of whom nearly two-thirds are foreigners.

Pakistan and India came to the brink of war in 2002, but since April they have been inching towards the

normalisation of relations, with a series of confidence-building measures.

India accuses Pakistan of fomenting a 14-year Islamic insurgency in India's only Muslim dominated state of Kashmir by arming and training guerrillas and helping them sneak across the LoC.

Pakistan contends it provides only moral and diplomatic support to an "indigenous" uprising in India's sole Muslim-majority state.

India has fenced 170 kilometers (106 miles) of the 760-kilometer (472-mile) LoC and says it will seal all of it by October 2004.

More than 40,000 people have died in the Kashmir uprising since 1989 by official count.

China, Russia, C Asian FMs talk terrorism, separatism

AFP, Beijing

Foreign ministers from Central Asia, China and Russia met in Beijing yesterday to discuss joint efforts to fight terrorism and religious extremism in a region taking on growing strategic importance.

The ministers from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are attending the one-day Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Foreign Ministers' Meeting which also aims to boost the status of the regional organization.

They will hold a ceremony Thursday to open a permanent SCO secretariat in Beijing -- a move that is expected to help the group formed in 2001 increase its effectiveness in promoting regional security and economic cooperation.

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said the meeting aimed to review the implementation of agreements from last year's meet in Moscow, prepare for the next summit and provide a forum for

exchanging views on international issues.

"I believe through our joint efforts, the meeting will achieve expected results," Li said.

Kazak Foreign Minister Kassymzhan Tokayev said member states should adopt agreements on setting up a databank at the SCO's anti-terrorism center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan where information on terrorist groups and individuals can be shared.

Member states should also set up a system to facilitate travel and transportation among the countries -- a task he said was "a very important responsibility" of all six nations.

Founded in Shanghai in 2001, the SCO has largely been superceded by the US global war on terrorism, with Washington significantly increasing its presence in Central Asia with its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Still, with the creation of a permanent secretariat, member states are hoping the SCO will be strengthened into an important regional security organization.

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বয়স: সর্বোচ্চ ৩৩ বৎসর।

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