



PHOTO: AFP  
Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar (R) shakes hands with his India's counterpart Shashank (L) as India's High Commissioner to Pakistan Shiv Shankar Menon (C) looks on during a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. India and Pakistan are expected to finalise an agenda and timetable to discuss problems which have made them bitter enemies for more than 50 years.

## EU 'big three' hold Berlin talks

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The German, French and UK leaders are meeting in Berlin for controversial talks on the future of the European Union and other major issues.

Gerhard Shroeder, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair are due to discuss economic challenges facing the EU and reform as it takes in 10 new members in May.

They are also expected to address wider issues like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Other European leaders have criticised the meeting amid fears the three might be trying to dominate an expanded EU.

Italy's Europe Minister, Rocco Buttiglione, has repeated the view of the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, that the EU does not need such a directorate to run its affairs.

"Everybody is free to meet anybody, once, we don't care about it," he told the BBC. "But beware. Nobody in Europe is ready to be a second-class citizen. Europe is made up of 25 countries, not of three."

But the British Trade Minister, Patricia Hewitt, said it was sensible for the three leading economic nations to meet to co-ordinate policy.

She insisted there was no intention that they would try to dominate EU affairs.

The BBC's European affairs correspondent William Horsley says Mr Chirac of France and Chancellor Schroeder of Germany now accept

that their claim to be the joint "motor" driving Europe's future needs to be adapted as the EU expands to 25 states.

UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw says recent agreements reached by Britain, Germany and France, on European military co-operation and on cutting back EU spending, show how the three can serve the interests of all member states.

The summit is expected to produce a set of joint proposals for EU-wide economic reforms, aimed at boosting growth and jobs.

Each of the leaders will also be accompanied by four or five ministers for an afternoon of talks on EU issues, before they and their foreign ministers discuss wider international affairs over dinner.

"For me it is a very important meeting," said German Social Democrat MP Dietmar Niethan.

"It's a signal that in a larger EU, the German-French motor is not the only thing.

"Now is the time to show that we need team work with a lot of EU member countries, and especially Britain, as an important member country."

Officials say the main focus of the meeting is how to make EU economies more competitive - pushing forward the agenda adopted at the Lisbon summit in 2000.

"Per capita productivity in the EU is still about 20% lower than in the United States," said a British diplomat.

"This is about addressing that."

## 'Maoists' blast damages Nepal state airline HQ

AFP, Kathmandu

A blast set off by suspected Maoist rebels shattered the windows of Nepal's national airline headquarters yesterday during a military procession, police said.

The explosion went off in the ticketing office of Royal Nepal Airlines just after Crown Prince Paras left the army grounds about 100 meters (109 yards) away.

"There was a very loud bang and we could see a big blanket of dust rising after the blast. All the window panes were shattered on the front of the building," witness Ram Maya Tamang said.

He said he saw a man slightly injured by broken glass. Police confirmed the blast but had no information on casualties.

The airline headquarters was closed for Shivaratri, the festival to the Hindu god Shiva, but the pavements outside were packed with people watching the annual military show that featured large bonfires.

The blast came amid heightened violence in Nepal, where more than 9,000 people have died since 1996 in the Maoist uprising aimed at turning the world's only Hindu kingdom into a secular communist republic.

A security official said 65 Maoists were killed Sunday and Monday as troops equipped with attack helicopters seized control over a guerrilla training camp in the western Kalikot district.

The Maoists ended a seven-month ceasefire in August after peace talks broke down.

## We are not in nuke race with India: Musharraf

REUTERS, London

Pakistan has no interest in matching India's nuclear weapons development and does not need outside help to maintain or advance its programme, President Pervez Musharraf told the Financial Times newspaper.

He rejected any move to bring in foreign inspectors to monitor Pakistan's nuclear weapons or civil nuclear facilities after the father of the country's atomic bomb confessed this month to selling nuclear secrets to Libya, Iran and North Korea.

"We are not interested in competing with India," Musharraf said in an interview in Wednesday's newspaper.

But he said that in the next few weeks Pakistan would test-fire its Saheen II missile, which has a range of 2,000 km, making it capable of striking just about anywhere in India.

"If they want to reach 5,000 km, or have intercontinental ballistic missiles,

we are not interested in those. We are only interested in our own defence," he said of India.

In a wide-ranging interview, Musharraf also said Pakistan would not freeze its nuclear weapons programme.

"We will never stop our nuclear and missile programme," he said. "That is our vital national interest. It is totally indigenous now. Whatever had to be imported and procured has been obtained."

That included buying conventional surface-to-air missiles from North Korea in 2002 when Pakistan and India went to the brink of their fourth war after militants from disputed Kashmir attacked the parliament building in the heart of Delhi.

Musharraf said top nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan had acted alone in selling atomic secrets to other countries.

But many in Pakistan and outside

have doubted this, saying Khan could not have carried out the transfer of nuclear technology, including the use of transport aircraft to fly equipment to buyers, without the knowledge, and possible assistance, of senior military officials.

"No sir. It (Pakistan's nuclear programme) is not under the aegis of the military. It never was and it is not now," Musharraf told the Financial Times.

He reiterated he had heard nothing of Khan's nuclear smuggling since he became Pakistan's military chief in 1998 and the country's leader in a bloodless coup the following year.

"I believe in the army dictum that a commander is responsible for all that happens or does not happen in his command -- and to that extent any president is responsible for what happens in his country."

## Asia's bird flu toll rises to 21

AFP, Bangkok

The death toll from Asia's bird flu crisis rose to 21 yesterday, with confirmation that a four-year-old Thai boy had died of the virus which has staged new outbreaks in several nations.

Thai health ministry spokeswoman Nitaya Chanrungs Mahabhol told AFP that test results showed the boy from northeastern Khon Kaen province who died earlier this month was infected with the disease.

"The boy died on February 3 and had been on the list of suspected infections," she said, adding that the number of suspected cases had grown to 20 with the addition of a two-year-old girl hospitalised since February 12.

Another 14 people in Vietnam have died from bird flu but so far there

are no confirmed human infections in the eight other Asian nations which have reported outbreaks among poultry.

However, health authorities in Indonesia have launched an investigation into whether a 55-year-old man who died in hospital on Monday had eaten chicken infected with bird flu.

As more cases broke out in Thailand, China and Japan this week, the United Nations warned Asia's bird flu crisis was far from over and that nations should not set timelines to declare themselves free of the virus.

Japan's plans to announce this week that its bird flu woes were over were dashed Tuesday when it confirmed a second outbreak, just before China reported two new confirmed cases in central Hunan province.

The discovery prompted Japanese officials on Wednesday to begin

inspecting farms housing some 6.8 million birds near the southwestern prefecture where bird flu was detected in bantams raised as pets.

A ban on shipment of poultry and eggs within a 30-kilometer (19-mile) radius of the infected site was also imposed, officials said.

Thailand had also been on the brink of declaring its crisis over and begin rebuilding its devastated 1.2 billion dollar poultry export business before announcing Monday that bird flu had re-emerged in poultry in nine provinces.

Thai officials have warned they expect more cases to be confirmed when the results of the latest round of testing are announced on Friday -- after the close of the stock market which has been buffeted by the unfolding crisis.



PHOTO: AFP  
Workers march in to the Malaysian Feedmill Farm Pte Ltd. for the culling of chickens in Singapore yesterday. Singaporean authorities began culling 5,000 chickens 18 February in a test of the city-state's defences against bird flu, as authorities announced a high level task force to keep the island free of the disease.

## Parties lure film stars

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, from New Delhi

Come election and major political parties in India rush to rope in film stars faded and shining to shower glamour on the campaign and try to steal a march in the race to grab a space in the electorate's mind.

With the countdown having begun for parliamentary polls, ruling BJP is off the bloc in that race roping in a number of film, television and cricket stars and is looking for some more for its star-spangled electioneering.

The latest film personalities to join the BJP bandwagon are yesterday's star Jeetendra, popularly known as "Jumping Jack" for his ability to dance around trees in Hindi films, actor Suresh Oberoi, father of Bollywood superstar Vivek Oberoi, and former batsman Navjot Singh Sidhu.

All of them walked into the waiting arms of the saffron party yesterday hailing Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's leadership and reeling off the same line that BJP is the only party capable of taking India forward.

Along with Jeetendra, Suresh Oberoi and Sidhu, television actor Gajendra Singh Chauhan, who became a celebrity figure with his role of Yudhistir in the mega TV serial on the epic 'Mahabharat', also joined BJP.

Suresh Oberoi's father Anand Swarup Oberoi was an associate of legendary freedom fighter Shaheed Bhagat Singh.

Sidhu, who is now remembered more for his remarks as a TV commentator of cricket, said he would bat wholeheartedly for BJP in the elections. He deftly handled all questions by the media including one relating to allegations of corruption against a former chief of BJP.

Last week, noted actress and a handicapped danseuse Sudha Chandran, who shot into fame after the success of her debut Hindi film "Nache Mayuri" based on her life, joined BJP.

Film buffs will remember that Sudha Chandran, a Bharatnatyam dancer, became a handicapped person after meeting with a road accident several years ago but overcame the disability with an artificial foot to resume her career as a danseuse. Having acted in more than 70 films, she is now portraying the character of a vamp in a popular television soap opera.

Prior to Sudha, another well-known television actress Smriti Malhotra, playing the role of an ideal housewife in the hugely popular TV soap opera "Kyunki Saas Bhi Bhi Bahu Thi," also joined BJP.

The BJP already has a fair sprinkling of film personalities in its ranks Shatrughan Sinha and Vinod Khanna, both federal ministers,

dream girl Hema Malini, a party MP, and Dara Singh.

The party is also reportedly trying to secure Dharmendra, the former He man of Bollywood, in its ranks and persuade him to contest elections from a constituency in the desert state of Rajasthan which is dominated by Jat, the community the actor belongs to.

Not to be outdone, the main opposition Congress is also understood to be making efforts to induct reel-life actors to help boost the electoral prospects of their real life political actors.

The Congress is trying to rope in current Bollywood star Govinda not only for electioneering -- something the actor had done in the past for the party candidates, but also to contest parliamentary election from a constituency in India's commercial and film hub Mumbai.

Reports have it that Govinda may be fielded against India's Petroleum Minister and BJP nominee from that constituency Ram Naik.

The opposition party is also reportedly trying to get former Indian cricket captain Kapil Dev. But the former all-rounder said yesterday that he is not planning to join any political party but would campaign for some of his 'best' friends across the political divide if asked to do so.

## Haiti asks for foreign help, US rebuffs call

AFP, Port-Au-Prince

Faced with spreading rebellion, Haiti appealed for foreign help, but Washington rebuffed the call, telling Haiti to focus on fundamental reform and warning rebels against a violent takeover.

France, however, said it would consider sending peacekeepers and UN chief Kofi Annan said he was mulling some kind of action on the Caribbean island gripped by an uprising against President Jean Bertrand Aristide.

Haitian Prime Minister Yvon Neptune said international assistance was needed following nearly two weeks of violence which have left dozens dead and seen a number of towns fall into the hands of Aristide's opponents.

"The police force is young, the number of police is insufficient," Neptune said, adding that it was the "duty of the international community" to step in to help.

Haitian ambassador to Cuba

Marie Andrine Constant said from Havana that her government would prefer a police force set up by the Organisation of American States (OAS).

But US Secretary of State Colin Powell said in Washington there was "no enthusiasm" in the administration of President George W. Bush at this point for any kind of involvement in Haiti.

Discussions last week with Canada, the Caribbean Community and the OAS were about "sending in police to sustain a political settlement, not to go in and put down the current violence," Powell said.

"What we want to do right now is to find a political solution, and then there are willing nations that would come forward with a police presence to implement the political agreement that the sides come to," he said.

The White House urged Aristide to take "essential steps" to change the way his violence-racked nation is governed as well as the security situation there.

## WB barrier violates humanitarian law: Red Cross

AFP, Geneva

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) yesterday said the security barrier that Israel is building in the West Bank was contrary to humanitarian law, and should not be built.

"The ICRC's opinion is that the West Bank Barrier, in as far as its route deviates from the 'Green Line' into occupied territory, is contrary to IHL (International humanitarian law)," the ICRC said.

"The ICRC therefore calls upon

Israel not to plan, construct or maintain this barrier within occupied territory" as this would have serious humanitarian and economic consequences for thousands of Palestinians.

The ICRC generally seeks to remain neutral, and rarely expresses an opinion on issues directly linked to the policies of states.

The Green Line between Israel and the West Bank marks the armistice lines at the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.