

Asian states to boost information exchange on terrorism: Interpol

AFP, Manila

Asian police officials agreed to boost information exchange on terrorism through the international police agency, Interpol, the agency said yesterday as a two-day regional conference wrapped up in Manila.

The communique, issued after the Interpol conference ended late Tuesday, said delegates from 37 countries agreed to "participate in and contribute to these (Interpol) initiatives including the timely exchange of information about terrorists and terrorism".

The member countries of the France-based police group were encouraged to use Interpol's improved computer networks and databases in the fight against crime. This included Interpol's database on stolen travel documents, "recognized as a vital tool in counter-terrorist measures."

Among new measures also cited were the "Interpol Orange Notice" which warns institutions of potential threats from hidden weapons, parcel bombs or other dangerous objects.

There were also calls to make the Interpol's "Red Notice" -- an international arrest warrant -- more effective in hunting down suspected terrorists.

"Interpol is absolutely essential not only to the world's anti-terrorist fight but to any one country's fight against terrorism," Ronald K. Noble, the secretary-general of Interpol was quoted as saying.

He said that even if the March 11 bombing in Madrid, which killed 201 people, had not occurred, "we would have agreed that fighting all aspects of terrorism should continue to be among Interpol's highest priorities."



PHOTO: AFP

Visiting US Secretary of State, Colin Powell (R), shakes hands with Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali after a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Powell announced the United States would designate Pakistan a "major non-NATO ally," in a move that will boost military cooperation between the two countries.

S Asian rivals will have to resolve row on their own

US will only help Indo-Pak peace process: Powell

AFP, Islamabad

The United States will try to spur on the burgeoning peace process between India and Pakistan but will leave core negotiations to the nuclear rivals, Secretary of State Colin Powell said yesterday.

"At any point in this dialogue where we can be helpful, we will be helpful," Powell told a press conference in the Pakistani capital Islamabad, ahead of talks with President Pervez Musharraf.

"But it is essentially a matter that has to be resolved between the two sides or it will not be resolved in a satisfactory way.

"I am sure both sides will take into account the needs, desires, aspirations and concerns of the people of the region."

Powell played a pivotal role in coaxing the hostile neighbours back from the brink of war two years ago, when they had a million

troops massed against each other along their shared frontier.

The troop mobilisation followed a deadly raid on India's parliament in December 2001. New Delhi blamed the attack on Pakistani-backed militants and Pakistan rejected the charges, but tensions spiked nevertheless.

Amid fears the subcontinent was about to be plunged into a nuclear holocaust, Powell led a campaign of telephone and shuttle diplomacy in tandem with British and European leaders. The two sides began withdrawing troops in October 2002 and since April last year have been inching towards detente.

They reached a major breakthrough in January with a joint pledge to resume long-stalled dialogue, and last month held their first formal talks in almost three years.

The thaw hit a snag last week when India reacted scathingly to

remarks by President Pervez Musharraf that the 56-year-old dispute over Kashmir was central to dialogue. Islamabad called India's angry reaction "regrettable."

Powell refused to be drawn into the spat.

"I endorse the view that the two sides on the sixth of January agreed to enter into a dialogue on a variety of issues of importance to both sides ... Kashmir is part of that dialogue," he said.

"Everyone understands the importance of Kashmir to this dialogue and the importance of many other issues to the dialogue."

The territorial dispute over the scenic Himalayan region, straddling the neighbours' northern reaches, has caused two of their three wars. Both sides claim the Muslim-majority region but it has been divided between them along ceasefire lines since the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947.

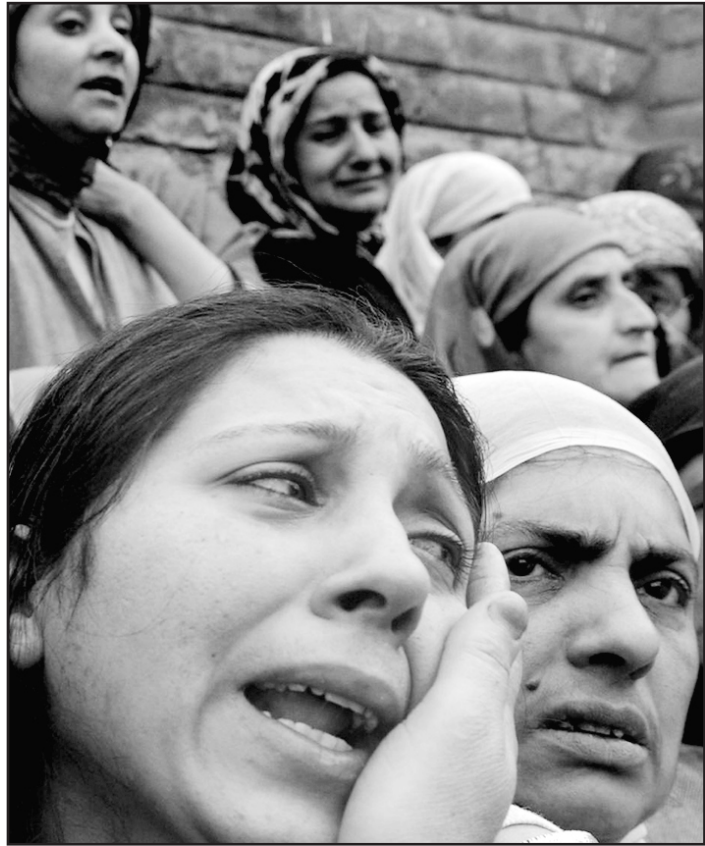


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri Muslim women grieve near the body of Mukhtar Ahmed after he was shot dead by suspected rebels in Srinagar yesterday. Mukhtar was Vice-President of Janta Dal (JD) Party Youth Wing.

Bollywood singer Bappi Lahiri joins Congress

PTI, New Delhi

Popular Bollywood singer and music director Bappi Lahiri yesterday joined the Congress and announced that he would actively campaign across the country to spread the message of party president Sonia Gandhi through his music.

Observing that joining the party was like a "dream come true", Lahiri, who is stated to hold a world record for providing music in nearly 435 films in various Indian languages, said he would contribute his best to canvas for the party in the coming Lok Sabha elections.

Senior party leader Salman Khurshid and AICC general secretary Subbirami Reddy welcomed the singer into the party fold.

Lahiri was accompanied by his wife Chitra, daughter Rema and son Bhappa, who would also participate in the party's campaigns.

'Offshoot better than a Cong led by Sonia'

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, Guwahati

He speaks highly of the performance of the NDA government, sings paeans in praise of the Prime Minister and doesn't see anything wrong with the Bharatiya Janata Party. Notwithstanding his closeness with the saffron party, former Lok Sabha Speaker PA Sangma believes he won't feel "comfortable" in the BJP.

"Ideologically, having been with the Congress throughout my life, I don't feel I will be comfortable in the BJP. Hence I have opted for an alliance with the All India Trinamul Congress led by Miss Mamata Banerjee. An offshoot of Congress is better than the Congress led by Sonia Gandhi who was not born in India," Sangma said, while interacting with media here.

He said the Election Commission verdict left him with no other option but to contest the Lok Sabha polls as an Independent candidate. "With Mamata and me coming together, issues of eastern and north eastern India can be raised more forcefully in New Delhi," he added. The Trinamul Congress would provide a platform

for Congressmen unhappy with the incumbent party leadership. He predicted that Congress would disintegrate in case of a defeat in the polls.

The former Lok Sabha Speaker, who is preparing to contest polls from Tura constituency of Meghalaya for the eighth time, stated that as per the merger agreement with All India Trinamul Congress and the breakaway Nationalist Congress Party led by him, the party would be known as Nationalist Trinamul Congress all over the country barring West Bengal and Tripura where AITC has strong base.

Sangma has represented Tura for seven terms since 1977. Regarding the eight NCP MLAs in Meghalaya, Mr Sangma said: "It is a tactical move suggested by me so that they don't get disqualified under the anti-defection law, but they will continue to support me outside the confinement of Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. All of them will be electioneering for me in during the polls as the anti-defection law has no say on what they do outside the Assembly."

Pakistan keeps up al-Qaeda hunt

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday launched a "major" ground and air offensive against al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the northwest border region where 39 people were killed two days ago, the military said.

"It is a proper operation, it is a major operation," military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

Hundreds of army and paramilitary troops backed by helicopter gunships raided tribesmen's homes in the neighbouring villages of Kalushah and Azam Warzak in South Waziristan tribal district at 10:00am (0500 GMT), said another security official who could not be named.

Residents woke earlier to announcements to evacuate issued over mosques' loud speakers, said local administration official Shafiquz Zaman.

"At seven in the morning announcements were made in the area that people should go to safer places. They were given three hours. The operation started exactly at 10:00 am and it is in progress," Zaman told AFP by phone from the South Waziristan capital Wana.

The paramilitary Frontier Corps was spearheading the operation with regular army troops backing them up. Helicopter gunships provided air support.

Fifteen soldiers and at least 24 militants were killed Tuesday after paramilitary troops surrounded a residential compound in Kalushah, around 20km from the Afghan border, where tribesmen were sheltering scores of heavily-armed al-Qaeda and Taliban suspects.

Another 13 soldiers and two local administration officials have been missing since Tuesday's operation.

US was wrong on Iraq: China

War 'may have been a mistake': Italian minister

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday said the situation in Iraq a year after the United States launched its invasion had proved Washington was wrong to try to use force to solve its disputes.

"Last year, we made very clear China's position on this issue. We stressed that international disputes should be resolved peacefully through dialogue and the UN Security Council," said foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan.

"One year has passed, and we see that China's position was correct."

In the lead-up to the US-led war, Beijing took a firm anti-war stance alongside France, Russia and Germany, arguing that weapons inspectors be given more time to do their job and that the United Nations first approve any attack.

Kong said that the evidence in the past years spoke for itself.

"The situation in Iraq has not

improved," he said during a regular briefing.

"There have been constant attacks and bombings. Early this morning, there was a big explosion in Iraq causing large casualties," he said, referring to a deadly blast outside a Baghdad hotel, which killed at least 17.

The bombing in question in fact occurred Wednesday.

"We hope that Iraqi people will rule Iraq at an early date," he added.

While China's relations with the United States are considered at their best in years, there are several sticky issues, not least the Taiwan issue and Washington's perceived unilateralism.

In a scathing report on the United States' human rights record earlier this month, Beijing accused Washington of "wantonly engaging in military adventures, violently invading the sovereignty of other nations..."

"Since the United States initiated the war on Iraq, 16,000 Iraqis have been killed including 10,000 citizens," the report said.

Despite its concerns over the security situation in Iraq, China in February sent its first team of diplomats back to the country since it evacuated its embassy in Baghdad three days before the war started last March.

Meanwhile, an Italian minister yesterday broke ranks with his pro-war government on Iraq, telling a newspaper that last year's invasion could have been a mistake, and was in any case not the best thing to have done.

"The war may have been a mistake. Perhaps there were ways it could have been avoided," said European Affairs Minister Rocco Buttiglione in an interview published by the daily newspaper Il Messaggero.

Europe set for terror talks as Madrid jitters grow

AFP, Brussels

EU interior ministers are set to gather today for emergency talks on how to respond to the devastating Madrid bomb blasts, which have revived terrorism jitters worldwide two and a half years after September 11.

Proposals being considered at the hastily-arranged talks in Brussels include creating an EU "Mr Terrorism" to coordinate a security clampdown, setting up a CIA-style intelligence agency for Europe and invoking a "solidarity" clause.

Terrorism has leapt to the top of Europe's agenda after last week's rush-hour train blasts, which killed over 200 people and injured some 1,500 in the worst act of terror since the 1988 Lockerbie bombing over Scotland.

The EU's Irish presidency called Friday's talks to prepare the ground for a summit of EU leaders next week likely to be overshadowed by the Madrid attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian policeman diverts Congress supporters following Karnataka Chief Minister S.M. Krishna as he embarks on his election campaign in Bangalore yesterday. India will deploy more than 130,000 troops and police to guard the world's largest elections which will take place in five phases from April 20 to May 10.