

Kashmir roadmap ready: Kasuri

Vajpayee for talks only with Hurriyat

ANI, PTI, Karachi/ New Delhi

India and Pakistan have finalised the roadmap on Kashmir and significant headway was expected on the issue during talks between the foreign ministers of the two countries scheduled for July and August, Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri has said.

Stating that this time the two countries seemed serious about pursuing peace and negotiations, Kasuri said: "We believe that this process of peace will not halt anymore."

The foreign minister said this while addressing a conference on 'Peace and Friendship in South Asia', the Daily Times reported on Sunday.

Kasuri said a roadmap on Kashmir did exist and it was jointly prepared by Pakistan and India, but its details could not be revealed yet. He predicted significant developments in this regard in the forthcoming Indo-Pak parleys.

"When you ask, do we have a roadmap? I say, yes, we have a roadmap and it is made up by us - Pakistani and Indian governments have jointly made it and we call it a composite process and this is the roadmap."

About the possibility of opening a

visa office in Karachi by India, Kasuri said that in return, Pakistan should be allowed to open visa office in Mumbai's Jinnah House.

Later, while talking to journalists, Kasuri reportedly said the ongoing general elections in India would not affect the Indo-Pak dialogue. He hoped the resumption of a composite dialogue between India and Pakistan would help resolve all issues including Kashmir.

PTI adds: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday said that the stage has not come for the Centre to hold talks with those other than the Hurriyat Conference.

"That stage has not come. We will have to talk to Hurriyat," he said in an interview when asked whether the government would consider broad-based the dialogue beyond the separatist amalgam Hurriyat.

To a question on militants stepping up violence in Jammu and Kashmir, he said the news from the state was good that people were going in large numbers to vote.

"The violence has gone up because people are going to vote and they (militants) want to stop them from voting. Our reports are good. People are enthusiastic and coming to vote despite violence and braving threats."

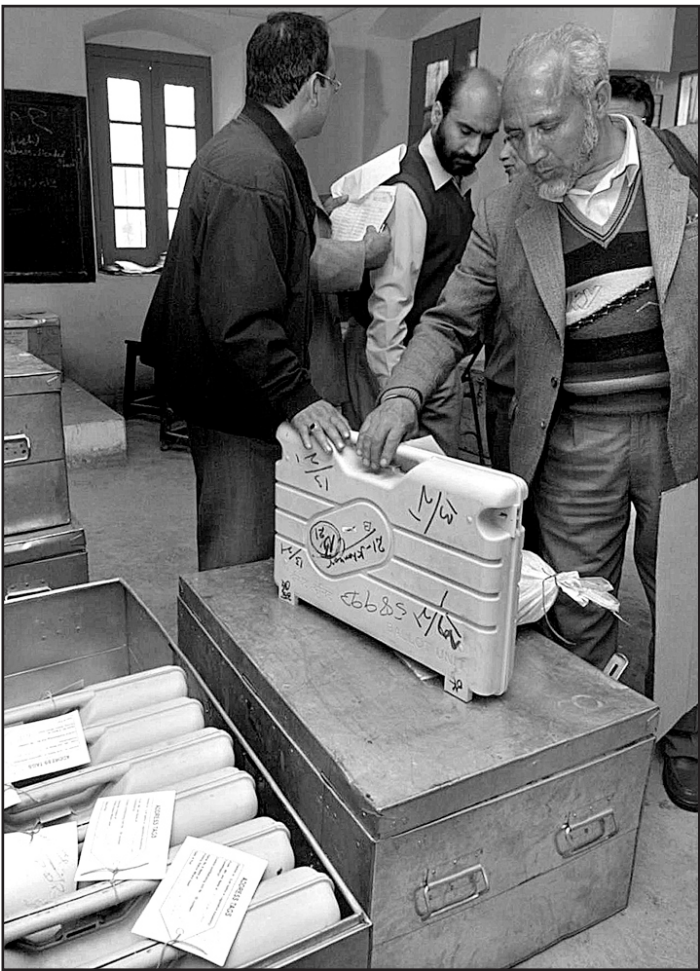


PHOTO: AFP

Indian election officials check Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) in Srinagar yesterday on the eve of the third of five phases of the world's largest election. The computer keyboard-style boxes are "tamper proof," averting chronic complaints of ballot-stuffing by feuding parties in previous elections and are to save an estimated 10,000 tonnes of ballot paper.

Indian Election

Focus on Muslim voters

AFP, New Delhi

When India goes to the polls today in the third round of general elections, the focus will be on the key ballots of Muslim voters, analysts say.

Voting will take place in 11 states where there are large Muslim populations whose votes could decide the outcome, either by allowing ruling Hindu nationalists to make new inroads or staying loyal to the Congress and regional parties.

"This phase is the real election," political analyst Yashwant Deshmukh said.

The states voting Monday include large swathes of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state and politically pivotal for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the main opposition Congress.

Political wisdom holds that whichever party wins the Hindi heartland state of Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 legislators to the 545-seat parliament, forms the government in New Delhi.

Also in the frame in this polling round are western Maharashtra state, eastern Bihar and Assam states, and southern Karnataka.

For the past few weeks Indian politicians -- including those from the BJP which long had the tag of being anti-Muslim -- have been unabashedly wooing the Muslim

vote.

India's estimated 140 million Muslims, who make up 13 percent of the total population of over one billion, have traditionally voted for the Congress and recently for the Samajwadi Party, a socialist regional party in power in Uttar Pradesh.

Now the BJP is seeking to cut into the Congress' Muslim support base, downplaying the revivalist Hindu platform on which it rode to political centre-stage in the late 1980s and seeking to position itself as a party of the mainstream -- reaching out to Hindus and Muslims alike.

As part of the exercise, Vajpayee told an election rally earlier this week Hindus and Muslims must come together.

"I've been striving for years so Hindus and Muslims in the country live together, foster brotherhood, help each other and make each other secure so together they could take the country forward," Vajpayee said.

He also talked about India's efforts to improve relations with Pakistan, showcasing this as a sign of the BJP's efforts to create religious harmony.

The BJP's push for Muslim votes represents an image makeover for the party that is basing its campaign on India's booming economy and peace moves with Pakistan.

Just two years ago, human rights

groups and the opposition accused it of turning a blind eye to religious riots in western Gujarat state in which at least 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed -- charges it denied.

At Thursday's rally Vajpayee said, "Let us resolve not to allow another Gujarat to happen anywhere else."

In the 1999 election, the BJP paid little attention to getting Muslim voters on its side. Now however its leaders are realising they cannot afford to bypass Muslim voters, analysts and the media say.

"Like it or not you can't ignore every seventh voter in the country," said the Times of India in a front-page article, referring to what it called the "great scramble" for Muslim votes.

Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born leader of the Congress party which has portrayed itself as the champions of India's secular character, has branded the BJP's about-face a cynical political move.

Among the states going to polls Monday, the Muslim population is 28.5 percent in Assam, 22 percent in West Bengal, 16 percent in Uttar Pradesh and 15 percent in Bihar.

"In this phase, Uttar Pradesh comes into the picture. Also in most seats, the Muslim voters would be casting their votes. All the parties are vying for their votes. So in a way, this will be a 'make or break' day of polling," said Deshmukh.

Cool Vajpayee admits polls no cakewalk

PTI, New Delhi

Exit polls are indicating a slide in the NDA's number of seats, but Prime Minister Vajpayee is not worried. Confident of retaining power, the PM, however, conceded it would not be a walkover for the ruling coalition.

Refusing to attach much importance to the exit polls, most of which had shown the NDA returning to power with a reduced majority and the Opposition improving its tally, he said while these polls were an "indicator", sometimes they go topsy-turvy.

The Congress's gains in the exit polls have become point of many a debate in poll circles, but the PM laughed it away saying, "Why is the Congress so much happy that now we have to be worried?"

Vajpayee said the elections were going as per the BJP's expectations and expressed confidence that the NDA would get a majority.

But will the NDA get more seats? Vajpayee said it depended on areas.

"The result of the exit polls so far are from areas where we had good expectations. Now we are in areas where there will be keen contest."

Vajpayee said earlier polls predicted the situation was bad in Karnataka for the BJP but now they say "we will do well".

Pak amnesty to al-Qaeda supporters shows weakness: Analysts

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's offer of an amnesty to five tribal rebels accused of sheltering al-Qaeda fighters near the Afghan border shows how little control the government has over remote tribal strongholds, analysts said. The five tribesmen led fierce resistance to an army-led assault last month on their hideouts in the remote South Waziristan region, where senior al-Qaeda leaders are thought to have taken refuge in the past.

But Saturday's government offer of amnesty looked more like a concession to the outlaws in a bid to appease the anger of local tribes than a surrender by the fugitives, analysts said.

"Basically what the army realises is that it can't wrinkle them out so it has to make the best of a bad job," said political analyst Mohammad Afzal Niazi.

The deal signed with the five fugitives will see them hand in a list of foreign militants living with them in return for a promise of peace -- and marks a pause in Pakistan's campaign to weed out the foreign fighters.

In March the government launched a 12-day offensive which

left at least 46 troops and 15 civilians dead while 63 supporters of the wanted men were also killed and 163 were captured.

Since the March offensive, the government has been threatening military action to round up the five men for sheltering Al-Qaeda linked militants. It twice postponed deadlines for threatened military action before agreeing to a political settlement. "This is unprecedented because the administration does not let tribal people go unpunished, especially if they fight the Pakistani state," writer and analyst Rahimullah Yousafzai told AFP.

"It is a retreat although the military will not acknowledge it," he said.

Yousafzai said the deal was going to weaken the government's stand against the fight against terrorism in the region by setting a precedent for giving in to militants.

Pakistan has trodden a fine line between appeasing local anger and maintaining its alliance with the United States, since President Pervez Musharraf withdrew Pakistan's previous support of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks on the US and sided with Washington.

Israel may expel Arafat to Gaza

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel backed off its latest threat against Yasser Arafat yesterday, saying no action was imminent but that the Palestinian president could eventually be expelled to the Gaza Strip.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's declaration Friday that he was no longer bound by a pledge to the United States not to harm Arafat sparked outcry abroad and speculation in Israel that he was trying to rally right-wing support for a Gaza pullout plan.

A Sharon deputy cast the remarks as a warning to Arafat, who is under virtual Israeli siege in his West Bank compound accused of fomenting violence in a Palestinian revolt. The ex-guerrilla leader denies this, but says he would welcome "martyrdom."

"Prime Minister Ariel Sharon does not intend to put something into action this very week, or today or tomorrow," Vice Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Army Radio on Sunday.

"He set out a position in principle regarding Arafat and the immunity he (Arafat) thought he enjoyed."

A senior source in Sharon's office said Israel was examining different plans of action against Arafat. "One

option is to expel him to Gaza," the source said without giving details.

Sharon wants to pull Israeli troops and settlers out of Gaza by 2005, leaving the cramped coastal strip clear for Palestinian statehood. Palestinians reject the Sharon "disengagement plan" as a ploy to cement Israel's hold on much of the West Bank.

The Israeli prime minister also faces opposition from within his Likud party, which will hold a May 2 referendum on the plan.

Political analysts saw Sharon's latest threats on Arafat as a bid to win over the more hawkish of Likud's 200,000 members against robust lobbying by pro-settler groups.

"He is warming up to their rowdy temperament in order to guarantee their support for his disengagement plan," commentator Uzi Ben-Zaman wrote in the left-leaning newspaper Haaretz.

Washington says it still holds Sharon to his promise not to physically harm Arafat.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei issued a statement blaming US "bias" toward Israel for emboldening Sharon.



PHOTO: AFP

Hundreds of protestors march through the streets Saturday in Washington, DC, against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting, chanting that they should globalise justice, not capitalism.

Fallujah truce extended indefinitely: Mediator

AFP, Baghdad

A new agreement between officials in Fallujah and the US-led coalition was reached to extend the ceasefire "indefinitely" in the besieged Sunni flashpoint and enforce a ban on carrying arms, a mediator involved in the talks told AFP yesterday.

"We have reached a new deal that extended the ceasefire indefinitely and secured an agreement on several new points," said Hashim al-Hassani of the Iraq Islamic Party.

He said the deal includes a ban on carrying weapons as of Tuesday and the start of joint patrols of Iraqi police and Iraqi Civil Defence Corps forces and coalition troops in the city on the same day.

Hassani said the deal calls for "continuing the gathering of heavy weapons" from insurgents and

allowing families to return to Fallujah and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid.

The Sunni Iraq Islamic Party is represented on the US-appointed Governing Council.

A senior coalition military official only confirmed that talks on Friday night would allow the return of 67 families to Fallujah today.

US Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, deputy operations director for the US-led coalition, said Friday that insurgents in Fallujah were not honouring the truce and that this may force US marines to go back on the offensive.

"We will continue to talk ... (but) our patience is not eternal. The coalition is prepared to act," he said.

The New York Times reported Sunday that US President George W. Bush and his senior national

security and military advisers are expected to decide this weekend whether to order an invasion of Fallujah.

The paper also reported that US Secretary of Defence Donald H. Rumsfeld has "expressed strong doubts that the Fallujah political and business figures the Americans are talking to hold any sway over the insurgents."

Meanwhile, US commanders are under mounting pressure to increase troop levels in Iraq but the superpower army and its reserves are already stretched, experts say.

The US Defence Department has extended by 90 days the tours of 20,000 soldiers in Iraq and offered to find new troops to keep the deployment at 135,000, if the military deems it necessary.

Plan to reunify Cyprus defeated in referendum

AP, Nicosia

A UN plan to reunify the war-divided island of Cyprus collapsed Saturday despite American and European support when Greek Cypriots rejected the proposal in one referendum and Turkish Cypriots endorsed it in another.

That means Cyprus will not join the European Union on May 1 as a united state. Rather, EU laws and benefits will apply only to Greek Cypriots living in the island's south, according to a deal negotiated with European leaders.

Cyprus has been split into a Greek Cypriot-controlled south and a Turkish-occupied north since Turkey invaded in 1974 after a coup by supporters of a union with Greece. The breakaway state is recognised only by Turkey, which maintains 40,000 troops there.

The reunification plan was drawn up by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the United States was "disappointed" by the Greek Cypriot vote, calling it a "setback" to those seeking a united Cyprus.

10 killed as gangs clash in Maluku

AP, Ambon

Muslim and Christian gangs fought running battles in Indonesia's Maluku islands yesterday, leaving at least 10 people dead, including two youths who were hacked to death by sword-wielding men, witnesses and officials said.

More than 50 people were injured in the clashes in the provincial capital Ambon, hospital officials said. At least three buildings were set ablaze, including an office housing UN agencies working in the region, witnesses and a spokesman for the world body in Jakarta said. There were no reports of UN staffers being injured.

More than 9,000 people were killed in the Maluku between 1991 and 2001 in fighting between Muslims and Christians that attracted Islamic militants from all over Southeast Asia.

China reports 4 new suspected Sars cases

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

China reported four new suspected cases of Sars in the capital yesterday, days after the confirmation of two cases linked to a Beijing research lab. Every new suspected case has been traced back to a single patient, the Ministry of Health said.

The announcement brought the total number of cases during the past week to two confirmed and six suspected. The new suspected cases are the father, mother, aunt and roommate of a 20-year-old confirmed Sars patient in Beijing, the ministry said.

The other confirmed case of the past week is a 26-year-old medical student in the southern province of Anhui.

Body temperature of the patient in Anhui has restored to normal level, said a local official.

N KOREA TRAIN BLAST

Red Cross seeks more information



PHOTO: AFP

This handout photo by the World Food Programme taken on Saturday and received yesterday shows heavy equipment being used to clear away some of the rubble left from the April 22 explosion at the railway station in Ryongchon, some 20km from the Chinese border. The Red Cross said it urgently needed more information to help the victims of the railway blast which killed over 161 people, injured some 1,300 others and destroyed thousands of buildings.

AFP, Dandong

The Red Cross said yesterday it urgently needed more information to help the victims of a railway explosion in North Korea, which killed over 161 people and destroyed thousands of buildings.

A team of aid workers and diplomats was Saturday shown the huge destruction in Ryongchon near the Chinese border, but they were not shown hospitals where many of the 1,300 injured were being treated.

Stalinist North Korea is the world's most isolated and secretive nation. It has a poor record of releasing information and aid organisations that work inside the country are subject to tight restrictions.

Thursday's explosion, which North Korea said was caused by a collision of rail wagons carrying ammonium nitrate fertilizer and fuel oil, destroyed virtually everything within 500 metres (yards) of the railway station.

"The medical infrastructure in North Korea is very challenged, so for us the most important question is whether or not there are enough medical supplies to treat those that are injured," John Sparrow, of the International Federation of Red Cross, told AFP.

"Our impression is that we were given insufficient information on this front," said Sparrow.

The joint UN-Red Cross team was meeting Sunday in the capital Pyongyang to discuss further aid plans for Ryongchon, where nearly 2,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged leaving many homeless.

"It is very important not to look only at the short-term needs as many thousand families have now lost their homes," said Red Cross official Niels Juel after Saturday's assessment tour.

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president has asked Norway to revive peace efforts with Tamil rebels marking a policy shift aimed at securing support for her shaky government, an analyst said yesterday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga invited Norway to resume its mediation shortly after her candidate for parliament speaker lost Thursday in a fiercely contested vote.

Minority Tamils and Muslims voted against her Freedom Alliance.

Kumaratunga on Thursday invited Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik to help revive the talks with the Tamils which has been on hold since April last year.

She has in the past accused Norway of being biased towards the Tamil Tiger rebels who have led a three-decade campaign for a separate homeland.

"Given the political reality in parliament, she is trying to consolidate her position through the peace process," said Jayadeva Uyangoda, the head of the Colombo University's political science department.

Twenty-two members of parliament are proxies of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Tiger spokesman Daya Master told the pro-rebel Tamilnet website that the Tigers were awaiting a formal request from Norway to restart talks.

The LTTE suspended negotiations in April 2003 after six rounds of face-to-face talks with the former government of prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.