

Indian PM promises peace with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India's new Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his first address to the nation promised yesterday a "new deal" for the rural poor and sincere efforts to resolve all disputes with rival Pakistan including Kashmir.

Singh chose to speak on television after the opposition Hindu nationalists prevented him from addressing parliament this month. The premier lashed out at his opponents for stopping "constructive dialogue."

Singh, an Oxford-educated economist who opened India's economy to the world as finance minister from 1991 to 1996, said his priority as the government drafts its budget due out July 8 would be to iron out economic disparities.

"Growth is not an end in itself," Singh said, according to an advance copy of his speech. "It is a means to generate employment,

banish poverty, hunger and homelessness and improve the standard of living of the mass of our people."

Singh's left-leaning coalition, known as the United Progressive Alliance, won an upset victory in April-May elections over the Hindu nationalist government, which had campaigned on the slogan "India Shining" highlighting growth of over eight percent.

Singh said that while many Indians were benefiting from the global economy, "chronic poverty afflicts millions" who are "still plagued by illiteracy, disease, want, hunger and malnutrition".

"The United Progressive Alliance is committed to giving a 'new deal' to rural India," he said.

"Agriculture must receive the priority attention it deserves. Public and private investment in agriculture has to be greatly increased."

He said the government, which

is supported from the outside by the communists, would actively seek more affordable credit for farmers and try to streamline red tape that stifles the agricultural market.

On improving ties with Pakistan, Singh said his government would "actively pursue" dialogue with India's historic rival.

"We desire to live in a neighbourhood of peace and prosperity," he said. "We are sincere about discussing and resolving all issues, including Jammu and Kashmir."

Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries are due to meet in New Delhi on Sunday to discuss bilateral disputes, carrying forward dialogue relaunched in January after a gap of nearly two years.

The defeated Hindu nationalist government also opened talks this year with moderate separatists on the Indian side of Kashmir, where an Islamic insurgency has raged since 1989.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian couple carry their belongings while evacuating their flooded house in Radhanagar on the outskirts of the Tripura state capital of Agartala yesterday. Three more people died as rivers swelled through eastern India, leaving an estimated 150,000 people displaced at the start of the flood season. More than 1,000 people died last year in floods across India triggered by monsoon rains and melting snows from the Himalayas.

Flashfloods displace thousands in Assam

Three more die

AFP, Guwahati

Three more people died as rivers swelled through eastern India, leaving an estimated 150,000 people displaced at the start of the flood season, officials said yesterday.

Two children drowned in the northeastern state of Assam and a man was swept away by gushing waters in adjoining Tripura Wednesday, local officials said.

The deaths raise to 10 the number of people killed so far in annual floods, after a family of three died when their hut collapsed in north-eastern Mizoram and four drowned in Bihar state.

In Assam, at least six of the 23 districts were affected by the first wave of floods displacing an estimated 150,000 people, state Flood Control Minister Nuzamal Sarkar told AFP.

Many of those hit by the floods were being put up in schools and makeshift shelters on higher

ground, a government spokesman said.

More than 1,000 people died last year in floods across India triggered by monsoon rains and melting snows from the Himalayas.

Earlier, at least 50 villages were submerged and rail services paralysed as the first of the annual flash floods hit the eastern Indian state of Bihar, an official said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties, the official in the state's flood control centre said.

Floods brought life to a halt in two of Bihar's districts bordering Nepal after incessant rains since Thursday caused the Bhuthi Balan, Budhi Gandak and Baghmata rivers to overflow their banks, the official said.

Rainwater had submerged rail tracks in Samastipur district, 200 km from the state capital Patna, affecting services, a railway spokeswoman said.

Pak forces keep up al-Qaeda hunt

AFP, Wana

Pakistani forces have begun a house-to-house search in a remote tribal pocket near the Afghan border where the military carried out a massive air and ground offensive earlier this month, officials said yesterday.

Hundreds of security personnel along with pro-government tribesmen have searched hundreds of houses since Monday in Shakai valley but found no militants or weapons, a security official said.

A military statement overnight said unidentified men fired several rockets at a military post in Razmak

near Shakai but caused no casualties or damage.

This was the first attack on security forces since a missile strike killed pro-Taliban militant leader Nek Mohammad last week near Wana, the main town in South Waziristan tribal territory.

Mohammad's seven associates including three foreigners were also killed in the missile attack last Thursday.

He was accused of sheltering hundreds of Chechen and Uzbek fighters around Wana when they fled the US-led offensive to destroy the Taliban in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

5 killed in Ulfa bus blast in Assam

PTI, Guwahati

At least five persons were killed and over 15 injured in a suspected Ulfa (United Liberation Front of Assam) triggered bomb explosion on a public bus in Upper Assam's Sibsagar district yesterday, according to police.

The improvised explosive device (IED) with a timer went off after 10.30 hrs (IST) at Mazgaon, under Mathurapur police station, when the mini bus was travelling from Sonari to Sibsagar.

Three of the injured had been shifted to Assam Medical College hospital in nearby Dibrugarh district, while the rest were admitted to Sonari civil hospital.

Lanka admits military backing to Karuna

Norway moves to salvage peace process

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government yesterday admitted that elements of the military had supported a renegade rebel commander despite warnings that capitalising on the split could push the country back to war.

Government spokesman Mangala Samaraweera said there was "no official" involvement with the breakaway Tiger leader V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, but said rogue elements of the military had been responsible.

"Obviously, there have been military personnel involved... that we cannot deny," Samaraweera said, acknowledging for the first time that security forces were involved in backing Karuna who had been leading an underground military campaign against his former bosses.

Samaraweera, who is also the media minister, said there was no "formal" probe but believed that

the defence ministry would "get to the bottom of it."

Sri Lanka's defence secretary Cyril Herath offered safe passage to Karuna when the Tigers mounted a major offensive against the renegades in the island's east in April.

Shortly after Karuna went underground after disbanding some 5,000 to 6,000 fighters under his command, the Tigers warned of "irreparable damage" to the Norwegian-led peace initiative if the Sri Lankan military or political parties moved to exploit their unprecedented rift.

Meanwhile, Norway's top peace envoy is due in Sri Lanka Monday in a fresh bid to salvage the island's faltering peace process, diplomatic sources said.

Erik Solheim, special advisor to the Norwegian foreign ministry, will spend four days in Sri Lanka and hold talks with President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Tamil Tiger leaders, the diplomats said Thursday.

Solheim was here last month to try to arrange talks between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but disagreements over the negotiating agenda prevented a breakthrough.

Diplomats here described Solheim's latest visit as "routine," but official sources said he would seek to jumpstart the peace talks which remain stalled since April last year.

The LTTE insists that its October 31 proposal for self-rule be taken up in talks before any final political settlement to end the three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Kumaratunga only accepts discussing the Tiger plan as part of a dialogue on core issues in the conflict.

Four previous attempts to end Sri Lanka's ethnic bloodshed through political negotiations failed.

US, N Korea agree to rare bilateral meeting

AFP, Beijing

North Korea and the United States agreed to a rare bilateral meeting yesterday on the sidelines of six-party talks, their first contact since Washington offered a new way out of the festering nuclear standoff.

The two main protagonists of the 20-month impasse were to meet in Beijing's Diaoyutai State Guest House at 0700 GMT, a South Korean diplomat said.

North Korea was also due to meet Japan, which Thursday announced for the first time its readiness to join international energy aid to Pyongyang if it freezes all its nuclear programmes before they are abolished outright.

The meetings follow the tabling on Wednesday of a seven-page US proposal aimed at dismantling the North's nuclear arsenal and ending decades of international isolation.

The offer submitted at talks also involving Russia, China, and South Korea offered a glimmer of hope that the stalemate could be broken, but it remains unclear how the unpredictable Stalinist regime will

react.

North Korea has lodged its own 12-page "freeze for compensation" document.

In a sign of how delicate negotiations have become, scheduled courtesy calls by the six chief delegates to Chinese leaders Thursday afternoon were put off in favour of bilateral contacts.

Without commenting specifically on the North Korean response to the US proposal, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said "various parties have treated the plans put forward by other parties in a forward looking manner".

For its part, China called the US package "full and comprehensive".

"The plan itself shows that the meeting is progressing and that the US side hopes to see the settlement of the issue," said Zhang.

According to the Xinhua news agency, Russian delegation head Alexander Alexeyev said the meeting, scheduled to end Saturday, would not conclude "without any result".



PHOTO: AFP

EU delegation head John Cushman (L), an Irish member of the EU parliament, meets with Kashmiri independence leaders Javeed Mir (R), Yasin Malik (2ndR) and Bashir Bhat in Srinagar yesterday. A six-member European Union delegation visited Indian Kashmir to assess the situation in the insurgency-torn territory but said it did not intend to "interfere" in the region.

Palestinian PM talks with king on Jordan's role after pullout

AFP, Amman

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei held talks here yesterday with Jordan's King Abdullah II on security measures for the Gaza Strip after a planned Israeli withdrawal, a palace official said.

Qorei "asked for Jordan's help in the training of the Palestinian security forces", he told AFP.

The king replied that Jordan was prepared to help train Palestinian police and security services "in line with an official request of the Palestinian Authority", said the official, asking not to be named.

King Abdullah and Qorei also reaffirmed a Gaza pullout should take place under the framework of the roadmap peace plan, which the king said he would continue to

support on the international scene, the palace official said.

A Palestinian diplomat said their talks covered Egypt's efforts to help avoid a power vacuum after Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza and evacuation of Jewish settlements in the northern West Bank.

According to the diplomat, Atallah Khairy, around "5,000 Palestinian policemen and security forces staff" have already received training in Jordan since the 1994 launch of Palestinian autonomy.

A group is currently in the kingdom for a training course, he said. "There are regular courses being conducted in Jordan," as part of cooperation schemes between the two parties.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (L), Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei (C), and Egyptian Intelligence Services Chief Omar Suleiman (R) talk to the press Wednesday at Arafat's headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah. Suleiman, President Hosni Mubarak's pointman on the Middle East, discussed with Arafat Cairo's role in the planned Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip, ahead of a meeting with Israeli officials.

'Vajpayee still tallest leader of BJP'

'Retirement talk a joke'

PTI, Mumbai

A day after former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee sprang a surprise by virtually announcing his retirement from active politics, BJP yesterday asserted that he remained the party's tallest leader and there was no need to draw an inference from what he had said.

"He (Vajpayee) has his own style. There is no need to draw any inference. He remains the tallest leader of the party," BJP vice president and spokesman Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi said.

Naqvi said all decisions in the party are taken collectively and Vajpayee heads the party's collective leadership.

Addressing party activists on Wednesday evening, Vajpayee said in Marathi "Aata bari nako. Pushkal jhale" (No fresh term for me. Enough is enough).

The former prime minister and the NDA chairman was responding to slogans from the audience - "Aghi bari, Atal Bihari" (Next time, Atal Bihari).

Meanwhile, the pro and anti-Narendra Modi camp in Gujarat BJP canvassed support for their cause with former chief minister Keshubhai Patel briefing former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on the discontentment among state legislators and Modi himself conveying to him on Thursday the state of affairs in the party unit.

Scotching speculation over his retirement from active politics, former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Thursday said his surprise remarks on Wednesday night indicating such a course were made in jest.

Addressing the concluding session of the three-day BJP National Executive here, he said his remarks in Marathi had raised a furore and that they were made in jest.

Vajpayee also asserted that there was "no power struggle" within the party. Kursi ki ladai nahin hai, he said.