

Pak PM rules out probe into Kargil

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan government has ruled out any probe into the Kargil episode saying it would open a Pandora's box and rejected deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's reported claim that he was not informed about it by the then Army Chief Pervez Musharraf.

Whatever happened was a "collective responsibility" by the Sharif government, Prime Minister Shujaat Hussain said, adding any move to probe the matter at this stage would open a Pandora's box.

Sharif had been taken into confidence by the COAS, General Musharraf, Hussain told reporters in Lahore yesterday commenting on the deposed Premier's remarks in an interview to an Indian weekly that Musharraf had not informed him about the Kargil operation. Musharraf overthrew Sharif in a bloodless coup on October 12,

1999.

"I say on oath that Sharif was fully aware of the operation and the Chief of Army Staff had six meetings with him at which I was also present. I can even recall the dates and time of these meetings," Hussain, who served as Interior Minister in Sharif's Government, was quoted by the media as saying.

He maintained that what he narrated was an "eye witness" account and "there is no need for a judicial commission" as demanded by Sharif's PML(N) party.

Hussain, appointed as interim Premier until the election to the National Assembly by Prime Minister designate Shaoukat Aziz, challenged Sharif to say under oath that he was not fully informed about the Kargil issue.

Hussain said as Chief of Army, Musharraf had told "Sharif of dates, the days and even the time. About the situation in Kargil."

Indo-Pak diplomats swap peace ideas

REUTERS, Islamabad

Top diplomats from India and Pakistan discussed proposals yesterday to push forward a nascent peace process between the nuclear-armed South Asian rivals, but officials declined to say what they were.

The breakfast meeting between the heads of the two foreign ministries, held on the sidelines of a regional trade forum, was the fifth this year and prepared the ground for talks between their foreign ministers scheduled for Thursday.

"We had good talks. The spirit was good, the discussions were good," Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar said after a meeting with his Indian counterpart, Shashank, who uses one name.

"We have discussed some ideas and they will be further discussed by our ministers," he told reporters.

"It is not possible to disclose those ideas because they are for our ministers."

Officials said the officials touched on some of the proposals discussed last month in New Delhi, site of their first talks in three years on the central dispute over Kashmir.

"There has been no talk that things aren't moving forward. Talks are making progress and they will continue to make progress," Shashank said.

Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh was expected in the Pakistani capital later yesterday for his first visit to Pakistan since his Congress party swept to power in polls in May.

Political analysts say they do not expect a major breakthrough this week, and view the talks as another opportunity to build trust between the traditional foes.

The two countries came to the

brink of war in 2002, but the restoration of transport links and diplomatic missions, symbolic steps including an Indian cricket tour of Pakistan and resumption of formal dialogue have raised hopes of a lasting settlement.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars, two of them over the flashpoint region of Kashmir, which both countries claim.

Analysts say officials' reticence to detail ideas being put forward reflects the sensitivity of the Kashmir dispute and the decades of mistrust that have soured ties since independence.

Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Khursheed Mehmood Kasuri are due to talk again in late August following a series of six meetings dedicated to specific disputes ranging from water sharing to a Himalayan battlefield called the Siachen Glacier.



Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar (R) shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Shashank prior to a meeting of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) members' foreign secretaries in Islamabad yesterday. Top Pakistani and Indian foreign ministry officials have opened talks to push forward peace process on the sidelines of the Saarc Foreign Ministers' meeting, to be held in the Pakistani capital from July 20 to 21.



Iraqi policemen and US soldiers inspect the site of suicide car bomb attack near a police station in southern Baghdad yesterday. At least ten people were killed and 56 wounded.

Philippines completes pullout from Iraq

AP, Manila

The Philippines said yesterday that it has completed the withdrawal of its peacekeeping contingent from Iraq, meeting a demand by Iraqi insurgents threatening to behead a Filipino hostage but defying opposition from Washington.

The last members of the 51-strong force made an "exit call" on the new Polish commander at their base in Hillah, south of Baghdad, then waved as they left in six cars.

Foreign Secretary Delia Albert said they would travel by road to Kuwait, a several-hour trip, then take a commercial flight home. They had been scheduled to leave Iraq on Aug. 20.

"Before the end of this day, all members of the Philippine humanitarian contingent will be out of Iraq," she said in a nationally televised statement.

Some of Manila's allies, including the United States and Australia, have sharply criticized the withdrawal decision, engineered to save the life of truck driver Angelo dela Cruz, saying it would only encourage more kidnappings. They argue it encourages terrorists and endangers other coalition members in Iraq.

There was no immediate word on the fate of dela Cruz. The insurgents who snatched him on July 7 near Fallujah, killing his Iraqi security guard, have said they would free the 46-year-old father of eight once the last Filipino troops had left.

Army Brig. Gen. Jovito S. Palparan Jr., commander of the Philippine contingent, returned home Monday ahead of his troops, saying he was happy to be back. Some of the peacekeepers left for Kuwait last week.

"The men I left there are OK," he said before meeting with Albert and military chief Narciso Abaya to report details of the withdrawal.

Bomb kills Hizbollah leader in Beirut

REUTERS, Beirut

A bomb killed a senior member of Lebanese guerrilla group Hizbollah in the southern suburbs of Beirut yesterday in an attack the group blamed on Israel.

Witnesses said the wreckage of a Mercedes car lay in the road, its glass shattered. Blood stained the road beside it.

In a statement, Hizbollah said the blast killed Ghalib Awali -- who it called "part of the Islamic Resistance's cadre" -- as he left his home at about 0530 GMT. Hizbollah's TV station, which broke into programming to announce the blast, called him a member of the group's leadership.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast.

Attempt on deputy CM in Kashmir: 3 killed

AFP, Srinagar

Three people died yesterday when a hand grenade exploded at a public rally being addressed by Indian Kashmir's deputy chief minister, police said.

Mangat Ram Sharma and two other state ministers escaped the apparent assassination bid, a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

Some 20 other people were injured in the blast, which occurred in the town of Kopran in southern Anantnag district, some 50 kilometres (31 miles) south of Srinagar. The attack occurred around 3:50 pm (10:20 GMT).

Meanwhile, suspected Islamic militants shot dead a Muslim couple in Indian Kashmir while counter-insurgency troops killed three rebels in two separate encounters, police said yesterday.

Suspected rebels overnight burst into the house of former militant Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh and shot him dead along with his 35-year-old wife Hameeda Begum near Shopian town, 50km south of the summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Their five-year-old daughter sustained serious injuries in the shoot-out, he said.

"Sheikh was suspected (by the rebels) of working with the counter-insurgency police," the spokesman said.

Arafat removes cousin as security chief

AP, Ramallah

Backing down in the face of violent protests, Yasser Arafat asked the ousted Palestinian chief of security to return to his job yesterday, placing him in command of his controversial cousin, Palestinian officials said.

The Palestinian leader phoned Abdel Razeq Majaide and asked him to return to the office he left last week at Arafat's request, said Nabil Abu Rdeneh, a senior Arafat adviser.

Arafat took the decision to calm the anger that has spilled into the streets of Gaza over the appointment of Moussa Arafat as security chief in the Gaza Strip, Rdeneh said. Opponents claimed the appointment perpetuated a system of corruption and cronyism endemic among the Palestinian leadership.

As head of the Public Security Directorate for all Palestinian territories, Majaide became Moussa Arafat's superior officer in the formal chain of command. However, it was unclear whether Majaide, who was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, will have real authority over Moussa Arafat's operations in Gaza.

In Gaza City on Monday, supporters of Moussa Arafat marched through the streets pledging their loyalty.

The turmoil came as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon planned to withdraw from Gaza next year, intensifying a struggle for power and influence among the various Palestinian factions.

Sharon, meanwhile, was trying to shore up his shaky government, also weakened by internal opposition to the Gaza pullout. Coalition negotiations between Sharon's Likud Party and the moderate Labor Party began Sunday and were to continue Monday, according to a statement from Labor Party leader Shimon Peres.

The Palestinian unrest began after Arafat decreed a consolidation of about a dozen disparate security branches into three services -- a key element of reform that the United States and Egypt have said would be necessary to revive deadlocked peace efforts. But the Palestinian leader defied international peace-makers by declining to put the security forces under the control of the Cabinet, and by naming his cousin as security chief.

Gunmen attack Indonesian church: Priest killed

BBC ONLINE

A priest has been killed and four others wounded during an attack inside a Christian church in Indonesia.

Police said gunmen entered the Eftata church in Palu, in Central Sulawesi province, on Sunday evening.

The female priest, 29-year old Reverend Susianti Tinulele, died at the scene as she was preaching a sermon. One of the wounded is in a critical condition.

At least 1,000 people have been killed in Muslim-Christian unrest in the province over the past five years.

The shooting happened near Poso, which has seen some of the worst religious violence in recent years.

Seven people were injured in an attack on a church near the town in April.

The national police chief, D'ai Bachtiar, flew to Palu earlier on Monday to oversee the investigation, according to local police sources.

In Jakarta, Chief Security Minister Hari Subarno said the attack was designed "to create a horizontal conflict" -- conflict between different sectors of society.

Bolivians approve gas industry nationalisation, more exports

AFP, La Paz

Bolivians have overwhelmingly approved increased state involvement in the lucrative natural gas industry -- the second largest in South America -- and increase gas export royalties for multinationals.

President Carlos Mesa, swept into power in October 2003 after riots that ousted president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, had staked his political future on the outcome of Sunday's referendum on Bolivia's gas industry.

All five measures on the ballot were approved, including a call for Bolivia to take back ownership of natural gas at the wellhead, according to early official returns from under two percent of precincts.

Under the measure foreign multinationals, including US, British, French and Spanish groups, would be paid for pumping oil, but would not own it.

Also approved: the repeal of a law granting foreign companies broad flexibility in exploiting Bolivia's gas, and a call to re-nationalize the former state energy concern

Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos, privatized in 1997.

Mesa told a news conference he would submit a bill to the Bolivian Congress that would boost royalties for gas exports by foreign companies to 50 percent of their value from the current 18 percent.

"I am going to defend... the will of the Bolivian people," he said.

Mesa said earlier that he would honor prior contracts with the foreign gas companies. The victory at the polls however gives him a strong hand to renegotiate contracts with those firms.

The referendum was a crucial poll on the impoverished nation's natural gas industry and the political future of Mesa.

Hundreds of thousands who lined up to vote ignored major unions' calls to boycott the vote.

Voters also approved a proposal to use gas as a bargaining chip with Chile to buy back at least part of Bolivia's oilfield to the sea.

Bolivia has had tense relations with Chile since this landlocked nation lost access to the Pacific Ocean during an 1879-1883 war.

Rajapakse talks Delhi's role in Lankan peace

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse held talks yesterday with Indian leaders on a range of issues including New Delhi's role in helping rebuild his strife-torn island nation, an official said.

Rajapakse, who arrived in New Delhi late Saturday on his first to India since he took office in April, spent about 40 minutes in formal talks with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh after which they attended a working lunch hosted by the Indian leader, an official said.

Earlier in the day, Rajapakse held talks with Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and National Security Advisor J.N. Dixit.

Talks with Natwar Singh focused on a fragile truce between Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers rebels and Colombo brokered by Norway and

in place since February 2002. India's envoy in Colombo Nirupam Sen told reporters.

"The main subjects that came up for discussion -- one was an exchange of views on the peace process," said Sen.

"The foreign minister said India would be able to give some economic assistance for the rehabilitation of the north and the east," he added, referring to areas under the control of the Tamil Tiger rebels.

India, which once backed Sri Lanka's rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, has since taken a largely hands-off approach to the ethnic Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

"The others are aspects in which the Sri Lankan prime minister is interested in, namely the work of rural reconstruction and rural development ... and certain infra-

structure projects," Sen said.

On Sunday, Rajapakse met Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar and Minister for Road Transport and Highways T.R. Baalu.

Reports said India was looking at new areas for enhancing economic cooperation with Sri Lanka, including agriculture and extending a new line of credit.

Rajapakse is accompanied by Trade Minister Jeyaraj Fernando and Marxist minister Anura Dissanayake, whose JVP, or People's Liberation Front, had earlier violently enforced a ban on Indian-made products.

The JVP has been accused of killing Sri Lankans who ignored their warnings to boycott Indian products, including pharmaceutical goods and Indian-made vehicles.



Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse (R) and Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh pose for photographers prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Rajapakse is on a three-day visit to India during which he will meet with government and opposition leaders.

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