

INDIAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

Negotiator wants Bachchan, Asha Parekh to appeal

THE STATESMAN / ANN, New Delhi

In a curious development, Sheikh Hisham Al-Dulaimi, the negotiator of the Iraqi militant group holding three Indian hostages, Sunday demanded that Amitabh Bachchan or actress of yesteryear Asha Parekh make an appeal to facilitate the release of the captives.

Both Bachchan and Asha Parekh have said that if the government asks them to appeal for the release of the hostages, they are willing to do so.

"If there is an official request, I am ready to do so, not just once but 100 times over. However, I don't want to do anything that would jeopardise their release. It's a political problem and lots of people are involved... I'm really a non-entity and hence I don't wish to jeopardise the whole process," Bachchan said. Asha Parekh said: "If the government asks me to do so, why not? I am most willing. If it saves someone's life,

I will be ready to speak to them (the abductors)."



PHOTO: AFP

Militiamen loyal to radical Iraqi Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr run to take position during clashes with US and Iraqi forces in the holy city of Najaf yesterday. Heavy fighting pounded Najaf where days of fighting between Iraqi security forces, backed by US marines, and Shia Muslim militiamen are believed to have left hundreds dead.

Sharon shelves plans for 1,300 new homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, under US pressure to cool down his government's settlement drive, has shelved plans to build more than 1,000 new homes in the West Bank, settler sources and reports said yesterday.

Israeli public radio reported Sharon had refused a request by the housing ministry to give the final green light for 1,300 homes in four of the largest settlements after completing preparatory ground work for the construction and obtaining the necessary authorisation from the defense ministry.

The houses would have been built in Maale Adumin, Ariel, Kiryat Arba and Beitar Elie.

While there was no confirmation from Sharon's office, leaders of the settler movement confirmed that a freeze had been imposed.

Josh Hasten, a spokesman for the

Yesha Council of Settlers, said that the movement was confident that the freeze would be merely temporary and said that there could be no arguments over the need for the new housing.

"This could be a temporary setback," he told AFP. "Our communities are growing and thriving."

"We do not think there should be any delays (to accommodate) natural growth. There's always a need as there's always a demand."

According to the Haaretz daily, the freeze is only temporary and is designed to ensure that all building work is within the municipal boundaries of the settlements and does not breach agreements between the Americans and Israelis.

It affects plans revealed in the last week for hundreds of new homes in Maale Adumin, the largest of all the settlements, as well as in Ariel which lies some 20km on the eastern side of the internationally recognised boundary

between Israel and the West Bank.

Under the terms of the US-backed roadmap peace plan, Israel is obliged to freeze all settlement activity although Israeli officials have argued that this does not rule out natural growth in existing settlements.

The US State Department told Israel last week that "the roadmap calls for an end to all settlement activities, including natural growth", a point taken up by visiting White House envoy Elliott Abrams in talks with Sharon last Thursday.

The Palestinians have been incensed by the prospect of the construction work.

Negotiations minister Saeb Erakat said Monday that the construction would "destroy the efforts exerted to restore the peace process to its normal track".

India, Pakistan swap 3 soldiers

AFP, Wagah

Two Indian and one Pakistani soldier returned home yesterday amid a peace process between their countries five years after being captured during the bloody Kargil conflict in disputed Kashmir.

The two Indian soldiers had gone missing in the 1999 conflict and were declared deserters until India verified they were being held in Pakistan.

"I'm very happy that I came back alive. At one point I felt there was no chance of coming back," Indian soldier Mohammed Arif told reporters as he crossed the countries' sole legal border crossing at Wagah.

Fellow Indian soldier Jagbir Singh said he was treated well in Pakistani custody but added: "I didn't have any hope before this of being released."

Indian forces turned over to Pakistan its soldier Salim Ali Shah, who said he had crossed into Indian positions "accidentally."

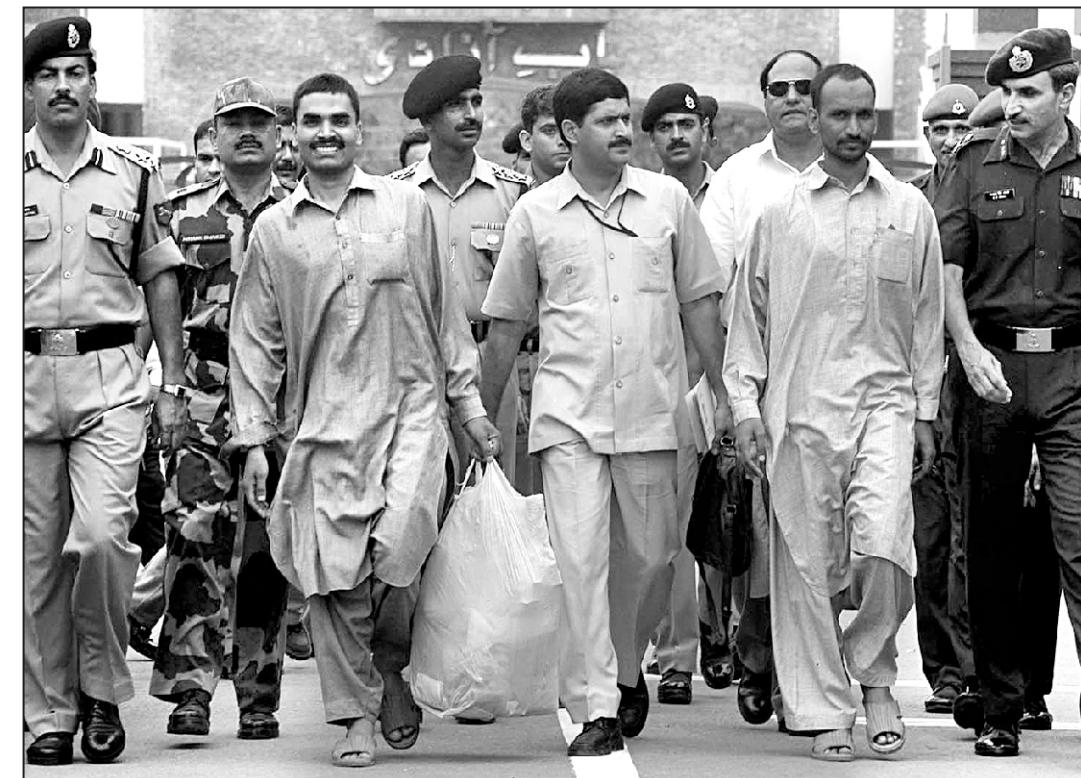
"They treated me well (in prison). But I would appeal to both governments to release prisoners of each other's countries," he said before being handed over to Pakistani troops.

Some 1,000 people died over four months in 1999 as India fought Pakistan-based infiltrators who crossed the icy frontier. It was not officially a war, as Pakistan denied backing the guerrillas.

Kashmir is divided and disputed between India and Pakistan and has been the trigger for two of the country's three wars.

The two countries began a peace process last year that has included the release of prisoners, particularly fishermen and other civilians, and discussions on the status of Kashmir.

The Indian side of Kashmir is wracked by a separatist insurgency that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1989.



Former Indian prisoners of war Jagbir Singh (2-R) and Mohammed Arif (3-L) walk along with Indian army officers at the Wagah border crossing yesterday following their release by Pakistan.

Pakistan rules out al-Qaeda hand

Karachi blasts kill 8

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani police yesterday ruled out al-Qaeda's hand in weekend bomb blasts in the troubled port city of Karachi which killed eight people, mostly students of an Islamic seminary.

Karachi police chief Tariq Jamil said the attack was probably sectarian, referring to rivalry between extremists in the majority Sunni and minority Shia Muslim sects.

"Why would al-Qaeda kill religious elements? Even to create terror in the city, al-Qaeda will not target religious students," he told AFP.

"The main possibility on which we are working is sectarianism."

Two bombs exploded in a roadside restaurant near the Jamia Binoria religious school in Karachi's industrial district late Sunday in which at least six students of the government-funded madrassah (seminary) were killed and 30 others wounded.

A six-year-old child, believed to be a passerby, was also killed while the body of the eighth victim was yet to be identified, police said.

Several students of the Sunni sect madrassah rushed out of the restaurant soon after a bomb went off. Minutes later a second bomb exploded as a crowd gathered.



Ulfa agrees to hold talks in Assam

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

A leading separatist group in Assam has for the first time agreed to hold talks with the state government, setting aside an earlier insistence that a dialogue can take place only abroad.

"We are willing to even come down to Dispur (capital of Assam) as long as the agenda of talks revolved around our demand for sovereignty," said K Matalonu, publicity chief of the SS Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K).

The Ulfa leader's statement was published Monday in Assam's newspapers.

"But the issue is whether the Indian government is willing to talk with us. As long as they (government) are ready to talk on that issue, so are we," he added.

The Ulfa has been fighting for an independent homeland in Assam since 1979.

The fresh offer is a clear departure from its previous stand that negotiations can only be held in a third country under UN supervision and its demand for independence should be the core issue of the agenda.

The latest statement makes no reference to the earlier preconditions.

At the same time, the Ulfa leader claimed responsibility for a grenade

Capitol among new US terror targets

Tourist helicopters considered for attacks: NYT

REUTERS, Washington

The US government raised the threat level based on evidence gathered from computer expert Mohammad Naem Noor Khan, whose secret arrest in July has helped authorities track down al-Qaeda militants in Britain and the United States.

Homeland security adviser Frances Townsend said on CBS' "Face the Nation" the targets were in addition to the five cited last week when the terror threat alert was raised to the second-highest level for financial buildings in Washington, New York and Newark, New Jersey.

Asked if there had been a threat against Washington lawmakers, Townsend said, "Yes, in the past and as part of this continuing threat stream, and so we shared that with them."

US Sen. Joseph Biden, a Delaware Democrat, said he had been briefed by the FBI regarding the situation in Washington, where security has been increased in the past week, most notably with checkpoints around the Capitol, occupied by Congress.

the terrorists exactly what we knew.... We worked directly with those other entities that have been targeted to take additional security precautions."

Townsend and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, also appearing on the Sunday talk shows, said US officials continue to be concerned about an attack intended to disrupt the Nov. 2 presidential election.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has given US officials what they consider credible and specific information indicating that al-Qaeda has considered using tourist helicopters in attacks in New York City, the New York Times said yesterday, citing US security officials.

A new directive as early as this week will call for increased security measures for helicopter operators, the officials said.

Among the measures under review is a requirement to screen passengers for suspicious items, a Department of Homeland Security official who was briefed on the plan told the newspaper. No groundings are planned, the newspaper said.

WAR ON TERROR

Pakistan again poses dilemma for US

AP, Washington

Pakistan has again proved it is the single-most crucial player in the war on terror: The site of an al-Qaeda ring that was targeting this country and led to the raising of the terror alert, and the nation whose cooperation is needed most to make arrests happen.

The commission that investigated the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks said it flatly: The role of Pakistan in the struggle against Islamic terrorism can't be overstated.

All this has many critics wondering if the Bush administration is pressing Pakistan hard enough to fight terror and extremism, or if a country wavering on the edge of chaos could be pushed to do

more.

They worry the administration may be ignoring a time bomb and a nuclear time bomb at that.

To assure Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's support on al-Qaeda, they say, the administration hasn't pressed him enough on fighting nuclear proliferation. Nor has it pushed him on Pakistan's lack of democracy, its poor human rights record or its extremist-teaching schools.

Some fear those factors could lead to turmoil in Pakistan resulting in America's worst nightmare: a hostile, nuclear-armed Islamic state.

For US policy-makers, it's a dilemma: How far can they go in seeking changes in Pakistan without alienating

India rescues 20 workers trapped in tunnel

REUTERS, Chandigarh

Relief teams cut through silt and debris yesterday and rescued 20 workers who had been trapped in a tunnel for more than 24 hours after a torrential downpour in a remote Indian Himalayan region.

Pakistan has been seen as one of President Bush's successes. Before the Sept. 11 attacks, Pakistan had strongly supported the Taliban government in Afghanistan that gave refuge to al-Qaeda. But two days after the attacks, the United States pressed Pakistan to end cooperation with the Taliban and provide military and intelligence assistance.

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turmoil in Pakistan resulting in America's worst nightmare: a hostile, nuclear-armed Islamic state.

Flood alert in Himachal, Tibet dam may burst

PTI, Shimla

The Indian Army and administration has been put on high alert in Himachal Pradesh following information that an artificial dam in Tibet is likely to burst triggering flash floods in Sutlej river.

People on both sides of the river have been asked to move to safer places as a precautionary measure as the artificial dam created by the landslide, which blocked Parashar river, is likely to burst within 24 hours because of continuous heavy rains, according to information received from China through diplomatic channel.

"All 20 people have been saved as there was plenty of oxygen in the kilometer-long tunnel," A.K. Puri, director general of police, told Reuters.

"Rescue officials and locals used excavation machinery to dig through the mouth of the tunnel. Last night's rain made the excavation work easier."

panic among the people living downstream Sutlej from Kinnaur to Koldam in Bilaspur district.

A high-level meeting presided by state Chief Secretary Kanwar Singh on Sunday reviewed the preparedness to meet any eventuality in case of flood in Sutlej.

Meanwhile, the Nathpa Jhakri Hydel Project authority again closed down its two units of 250 mw each following flash flood threat, which could result in silting of the tunnel and machinery.

The power generation in its two units were resumed on Sunday afternoon after three days.

The project is supplying power to northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Rajasthan through Northern Grid.