

Pakistan calls for bilateral flexibility on Kashmir

3 killed in Kashmir violence

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan said yesterday it would not make any concessions on divided Kashmir without India giving something in return, after President Pervez Musharraf unveiled a new formula to resolve the 57-year dispute.

"There will be no unilateral flexibility," Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri told reporters in the southern city of Karachi.

"It will be mutual, bilateral between India and Pakistan."

Musharraf Monday proposed a three-stage formula for finally resolving the rival claims of Pakistan and Kashmir, the first of which is to determine the ethnic and geographic make-up of Kashmir.

Demilitarising all or some of these regions would follow, with the final stage involving changing their "status".

"Change in status could be independent status, condominium which includes joint control, it can be UN mandate also," he said.

Musharraf's comments with-drew Pakistan's long-held demand for a plebiscite for the Kashmiri people to decide their own fate.

But Kasuri said Musharraf had not presented a solution to Kashmir. Rather, he had given ideas to start a national debate on how to resolve the dispute.

India gave a guarded response, advising Pakistan to use official channels rather than the media for raising options on Kashmir.

"They (the Indians) don't want a public debate but will discuss it privately," Kasuri said.

Kasuri also emphasised that Pakistan would not accept any solution unless Kashmiris also agreed to it.

"Whatever solution we consider, it must reflect the aspirations of the Kashmiri people," he said.

Kasuri echoed Musharraf's argument that there would be no solution to Kashmir if both nations

stuck to their long-held positions.

"What we have done is right, because... in the last 57 years opinions have become rigid and there is a need to change it. It is in the interest of the people of Pakistan, India and Kashmir," he said.

Majority Muslim Kashmir is divided between Muslim Pakistan and mainly Hindu India, and both countries claim the Himalayan state in full.

The rival claims have been the cause of two of the nations' three wars since their independence from Britain in 1947.

Meanwhile, a Muslim civilian, a rebel and an Indian soldier have been killed and six houses damaged in two separate clashes between Islamic militants and Indian troops in restive Kashmir, police said Thursday.

The clash in which the Indian soldier was killed occurred in the central district of Budgam, a police spokesman said.

WATCHDOG SAYS 125 Indian MPs facing criminal charges

AFP, Bangalore

Almost a quarter of India's 545 members of parliament face criminal charges, including allegations of rape, murder and extortion, a researcher said yesterday.

About half the 125 MPs facing criminal charges are from the northern states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand and from central Madhya Pradesh state, said M. Vivekananda, consultant for the Public Affairs Centre based in southern Bangalore city. "Of the information we have on 538 MPs, there are 10 MPs who if proved guilty will get less than one year in prison," he told AFP.

"There are 52 MPs who will get two to three years in jail and 63 others who may be sentenced to five years and above if their charges are proved," said Vivekananda, who co-authored the study.

The Public Affairs Centre is a non-profit outfit dedicated to the cause of improving the quality of governance in India.



PHOTO: AFP

Commonwealth Secretary General, Don Mckinnon (R) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (L) at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi yesterday. Mckinnon is in India for a two-day visit.

NEGOTIATOR SAYS Tigers not given up right to secede

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers have not abandoned their right to secede despite agreeing to explore a federal solution, the rebels said Wednesday amid fresh diplomatic moves to salvage a faltering peace bid.

Tamil Tiger chief negotiator Anton Balasingham said a joint statement after a round of talks with the Colombo government in December 2002 had been misunderstood and misinterpreted as the Tigers abandoning the right to break away.

"The Liberation Tigers' decision to explore federalism ... does not entail an unconditional abandonment of the Tamils' right to external self-determination and secession," he said.

Balasingham's remarks, taken from his yet unpublished new book "War and Peace" and reproduced on the pro-rebel website Tamilnet, came as Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway and main financial backer Japan moved to save the troubled peace process.

Japan's special peace envoy Yasushi Akashi was due here later

Wednesday for talks with both sides while Norway was expected to send envoys early next month.

The Tigers suspended their participation in direct negotiations in April last year after six rounds of talks with the government. The rebels have described the talks so far as a "waste of time".

However, the international community had projected the third round of talks in Oslo in December 2002 as a breakthrough, with the Tigers' agreeing to a federal solution in a country where 60,000 people had been killed in ethnic bloodshed.

In a statement after those talks, the Norwegian foreign ministry said "the parties agreed to explore a solution founded on the principle of internal self-determination in areas of historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking peoples, based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka".

The statement, which came to be known as the "Oslo Declaration", was interpreted by diplomats as a sign that the Tigers were firmly committed to working towards a federal state and there would be no return to war.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian Muslims supporters of the hardline Muslim group, "Mujahedin" shout 'Allahu Akbar' (God is Great) in front of Thailand embassy in Jakarta yesterday during a demonstration against the death of Muslims protestors in southern Thailand. Indonesia's press expressed fury over the deaths of 85 Muslim protestors in southern Thailand and warned that the incident would increase tension in the predominantly-Muslim region.

Thai govt under pressure to explain deaths

AFP, Pattani

Southern Thailand seethed with rage yesterday as grieving Muslim communities demanded explanations for the death of 85 detained protesters and separatists warned of reprisal attacks.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who called a meeting with senior security advisers amid concern over reprisals, has come under fire at home and abroad for excessive force by police and troops in quelling a large demonstration in

Narathiwat province.

Six protesters were shot dead in the Monday melee outside Tak Bai police station, while 78 others suffocated or were crushed to death after they were crammed into trucks for transport to an army base in neighbouring Pattani province.

Another victim died Wednesday but it was not clear if he had been shot or died on the trucks.

Islamic leaders said the south was extremely tense, with anger set to boil over in communities where

victims died without explanation.

"People here are in deep mourning. Many are expressing their sorrow and anger and denounce the action by authorities," Narathiwat's Islamic committee chairman, Abdul Rahman Abdul Samed, told AFP.

Some 415 people have now been killed in a separatist insurgency which flared up again early this year in the Muslim-dominated south of the mainly Buddhist kingdom.

PAK HR GROUPS SAY Death penalty won't deter 'honour' killing

AFP, Islamabad

The introduction of the death penalty for so-called honour killings will not stop the practice as it is still condoned by conservative sections of Pakistani society, rights groups say.

Pakistan's national assembly, parliament's lower house, passed a bill on Tuesday introducing the death penalty for honour killings, which the government says has led to the death of 2,774 women and 1,327 over the past four years.

The amendment also prohibits family members from pardoning honour killers and introduces a life sentence, which in Pakistan is 25 years, for accomplices.

"I think it was high time they did it. But, laws have also previously been there. Not as strong, but there have been laws to protect women's rights," Progressive Women's Association chairwoman Shahnaz Bukhari told AFP.

"Have they been implemented? No. I'm very concerned that this law should be implemented in the right spirit."

Honor crimes such as karo kari, in which a man and a woman are murdered for having illicit relations, occur most often in Pakistan's conservative rural areas.

Women are most often killed or mutilated by relatives in the name of protecting the family honour, with the practice regularly drawing

as high as five people deep" in the trucks.

The vehicles transported about 1,300 Muslim protesters who were arrested during a chaotic demonstration Monday at the Tak Bai police station in southernmost Narathiwat province.

Kraisak said he interviewed dozens ranging in age from 14 to the elderly, at a military camp and at hospital. At least two bore gunshot wounds including one man who had been shot in the face.

In addition to the 78 who died on the trucks, another six were shot dead at the demonstration. Another victim died Wednesday, bringing the toll to 85.

Kraisak lay the blame squarely on Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has come under heavy fire for his handling of the affair and of the broader violence in the south.

Congress party to take top job in Maharashtra

AFP, New Delhi

A deadlock over who would form the next government in one of India's richest states, Maharashtra, was broken Wednesday when parties decided Congress would take the top job of chief minister, officials said.

The dispute arose when a coalition formed by Congress, which also heads India's ruling national coalition, and its ally the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) won state elections held on October 13.

The stalemate was broken when leaders of both parties agreed at talks at the residence of Congress president Sonia Gandhi that Congress would take the top job, party officials said.

"It has been decided that the Congress will get the chief minister's post and we will get the deputy chief minister's post," Praful Patel, NCP leader and civil aviation minister, told reporters.

India slammed for welcoming Myanmar general

AFP, Washington

A US Senator slammed India Wednesday for inviting Myanmar's military strongman Than Shwe on an official visit to New Delhi despite his alleged human right abuses.

"It is absolutely appalling that the world's largest democracy is embracing one of the world's most repressive and illegitimate military juntas," Senator Mitch McConnell said in a statement.

"The community of democracies should expect more from one of its members," he said when commenting on the current visit to India by Than Shwe, who has refused to head international calls to release Myanmar's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

McConnell, one of the most vociferous critics of military-ruled Myanmar, said India had served as an exemplar for nonviolence and "should do more for those Burmese who continue to courageously and nonviolently struggle for democracy."

General Shwe arrived in New Delhi late Sunday with eight cabinet ministers on a six-day visit, the first to India in 24 years by a head of state of the secretive country formerly known as Burma, which has been under military rule since 1962.

"I hope it is not lost on India's leadership that their long-term interests are best served by a Burma rooted in democracy, freedom and justice," McConnell said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian human rights activists shout slogans as they take part in a demonstration against the visit of Myanmar leader General Than Shwe to India in Kolkata yesterday. Shwe has met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and senior Indian leaders during his six day visit as the neighbouring nations sought stronger ties.

Curfew imposed in two Indian towns

4 die in police shooting

AFP, Sriganaganagar

An indefinite curfew has been clamped on two towns in India's Rajasthan state after four people were killed when police fired on farmers protesting a water scarcity, police said yesterday.

Dozens of people were injured in Wednesday's clashes between police and farmers in the towns of Ghadsana and Rawala in Sriganaganagar district of the north-western state.

The clashes were sparked when the farmers vented their anger over the water shortage by torching vehicles and throwing stones at a police station.

"Four protestors died in the police firing to control the violent mob. Dozens of other people were injured and many of them are in hospital,"

S.N. Jerath, additional director general of police, said Thursday.

"The situation is still tense but there (has been) no fresh violence," he added. Army and paramilitary forces have been called in to control the situation.

The Rajasthan state government has ordered a judicial inquiry into the police firing.

The water shortage, for which farmers claim the government is to blame, has angered farmers because they have been unable to carry out their annual sowing of crops.

Angered by government inaction, the farmers kidnapped two dozen government employees Tuesday to press home their demands for water but police managed to rescue the hostages a day later.

Three foreign UN polls workers kidnapped in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Armed men dressed in army uniforms abducted three foreign United Nations election workers in Kabul yesterday as the final votes in Afghanistan's historical presidential poll were counted.

UN officials said one of the abducted trio was an Irish woman, another was a woman from Kosovo and the third was believed to be a Filipino man.

They were employed by the joint UN-Afghan election commission, which oversaw Afghanistan's first presidential election on October 9.

UN and Afghan officials said the kidnappers forced the three out of their car in front of a UN compound, then bundled them into a black Toyota four-wheel drive vehicle just after 12:30 pm (0800 GMT).

The kidnappers beat up the UN workers' driver and left him behind before tearing away at high speed, witnesses said.

The driver ran to the UN compound to report the abduction.

"They were stopped in Karte-Parwan neighborhood by armed men in camouflage military uniforms driving a four-by-four vehicle and were kidnapped," interior ministry spokesman Lutfullah Mashal told AFP.

Another intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the kidnappers were armed with AK-47 rifles.

The abductions drew disturbing parallels with the spate of kidnappings in Iraq.

Less than four hours afterwards, Arabic satellite television station Al-Jazeera said a group calling itself the Army of Muslims had claimed responsibility.

"Fighters from the Army of Muslims have kidnapped the three UN workers," the group's leader, Akbar Agha, told the station's correspondent in Kabul without making any demands.

Karte-Parwan is a densely populated residential and commercial area where the election commission had one of its offices. It was used as a base for civic electoral education workers in the lead up to the election.

Police checkpoints immediately sprang up around the busy capital as Afghan and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) peacekeeping troops blocked all main roads.

ISAF Apache helicopters buzzed overhead in a search for the kidnappers' vehicle while peacekeeping troops and local security forces conducted house-to-house searches in the affluent Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood.

"The search for them is going on," said Kabul intelligence chief Engineer Amin.

The US embassy had warned this month that foreigners in Kabul could be targets for kidnapping.

The abduction comes five days after a suicide bomber attacked a group of foreign peacekeepers buying carpets on Kabul's famous "Chicken Street" shopping strip.