

Pakistan backs UNSC berth for Japan, but no to India

AFP, Tokyo

Pakistani visiting Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri voiced support yesterday for Japan's goal of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council but had reservations about the bid of rival India, a diplomat said.

Kasuri held talks with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on the situation in Pakistan's neighbor Afghanistan and Japan's plans to resume yen loans to Islamabad among other issues, Pakistani ambassador to Japan Kamran Niaz said.

In a separate meeting Kasuri told Japan's main opposition leader Katsuya Okada that there should be "objective criteria" on choosing members of an enlarged UN Security Council.



US President George W. Bush (R) meets with French President Jacques Chirac Monday in Brussels. US President Bush is on a five-day trip to Belgium, Germany, and the Slovak Republic shoring up political relationships.

Bush, Chirac turn page on past tensions

AFP, Brussels

US President George W. Bush and his old adversary French President Jacques Chirac appear to have turned the page on differences over Iraq, focusing at meetings here on how to tackle tough issues like Iran, the Middle East peace process and Syria.

Since his arrival here on Sunday on the first leg of a fence-mending trip in Europe, Bush has been trying hard to send a strong signal of his willingness to open a new chapter in ties with European partners, especially those which fiercely opposed the US-led war in Iraq.

Setting aside their bones of contention, Bush and Chirac, who are here to for dual Nato and US-EU summits on Tuesday, were determined to inject some detente into French-US relations at a dinner Monday.

For a little over two hours, the two leaders met in the US ambassador's residence here for what one official described as an "extremely cordial" meeting.

Even the menu was designed to appease past tensions, featuring French fries, or chips, which several US senators renamed freedom fries during the war in Iraq to protest French opposition to the US-led invasion.

"This is my first dinner since I've been re-elected on European soil, and it's with Jacques Chirac -- and that ought to say something. It ought to say how important this relationship is for me, personally, and how important this relationship is for my country," Bush said.

But although the two leaders were smiling as they met in Brussels, they were clearly not that relaxed.

Not once before the gathered

journalists did Bush mention the war in Iraq, which soured ties two years ago and led to a deep transatlantic split.

Chirac however acknowledged the tensions, saying "Of course, we can have our differences, our divergence of opinion. Recently, this was the case. We didn't share the same view over Iraq."

"But this in no way affects, or in no way undermines, the bedrock of our relations, namely, our common values and our common vision."

Accused in the past of being deaf to criticism, Bush signaled his readiness to listen the French president views, saying: "Every time I meet with Jacques, he's got good advice."

"We've got a lot of issues to talk about: Middle Eastern peace, Lebanon, Iran, helping to feed the hungry," he added.

Annan defends UN as 'vital to humanity'

REUTERS, New York

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan defended the United Nations, which is beset by scandals from the Iraqi oil program to sexual abuse by peacekeepers, as "vital to humanity" in the Wall Street Journal yesterday.

"I have served the UN all my life. I have done, and am still doing, everything I can to correct its imperfections, and to improve and strengthen it," he wrote in an opinion piece. "And I believe profoundly in the importance of that task, because a strong UN is of vital importance to humanity."

Annan addressed charges of mismanagement and corruption in the UN's now-defunct Iraqi oil-for-food program, admitting there were failings while accusing some critics of hyperbole.

Pakistan urges US to help resolve conflicts in S Asia, ME

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf Monday asked the United States to help resolve conflicts in South Asia and the Middle East for a durable peace, an official statement said.

Musharraf made these remarks during a meeting with a bipartisan US Senate delegation which included Republicans John McCain, Susan Collins and Lindsey Graham and Democrats Russell Feingold and Hillary Clinton, wife of former president Bill Clinton. "The president has urged the United States to move from the stage of conflict management and assist in conflict resolution to bring durable peace to South Asia and the Middle East," a Pakistan foreign ministry statement said.

Musharraf during the hour-long meeting exchanged views with the

US Senators on developments in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Pakistan-India peace process, it said.

The Senate delegation welcomed the progress in Pakistan's relations with its rival India and commended Musharraf's "courageous leadership" in fighting terrorism and extremism, it said.

Pakistan is a frontline ally of the United States in its war against terrorism.

Meanwhile, soldiers clear mines from the bus route linking the two parts of the disputed region within a week after approval from Islamabad, a military commander said Monday.

The service, to start April 7, is the first tangible fruit of 13 months of dialogue between the neighbours who have fought three wars, two over Kashmir which each hold in part but claim in full.

Blockade halts oxygen supplies to hospital

12 Maoists killed in clash with Nepali troops

AFP, Kathmandu

A crippling transport blockade by Maoist rebels has hit a major hospital in southwestern Nepal where lack of oxygen has prevented doctors from performing all but the most serious operations, hospital officials said yesterday.

The blockade, imposed by the rebels since February 13 in protest at King Gyanendra's seizure of power, has brought transport to a trickle. Only small convoys of vehicles travel between cities under army escort.

It has also halted the supply of oxygen cylinders from the capital Kathmandu to the main government hospital in the southwestern town of Lumbini, the officials said.

"The Lumbini Zonal Hospital

issued a notice on Monday saying it has suspended (operations) until the shortage of oxygen is resolved," hospital official Keshav Pandey said.

The oxygen cylinders are imported from India while some are supplied by a firm in Kathmandu, Pandey told AFP by telephone from Lumbini, 300 kilometres (188 miles) southwest of Kathmandu.

"A small amount of oxygen has been kept for emergency cases," he said, adding that the hospital, which serves patients from six adjoining districts, normally gets through 15 cylinders daily.

Hospital superintendent Nath Sharma confirmed few operations are being performed.

"Excepting emergency cases, from Monday we have postponed all

routine cases," Sharma said. "Since the blockade began, no oxygen has been supplied to our hospital. Suppliers told us to use the stocks that we have until a fresh supply is available."

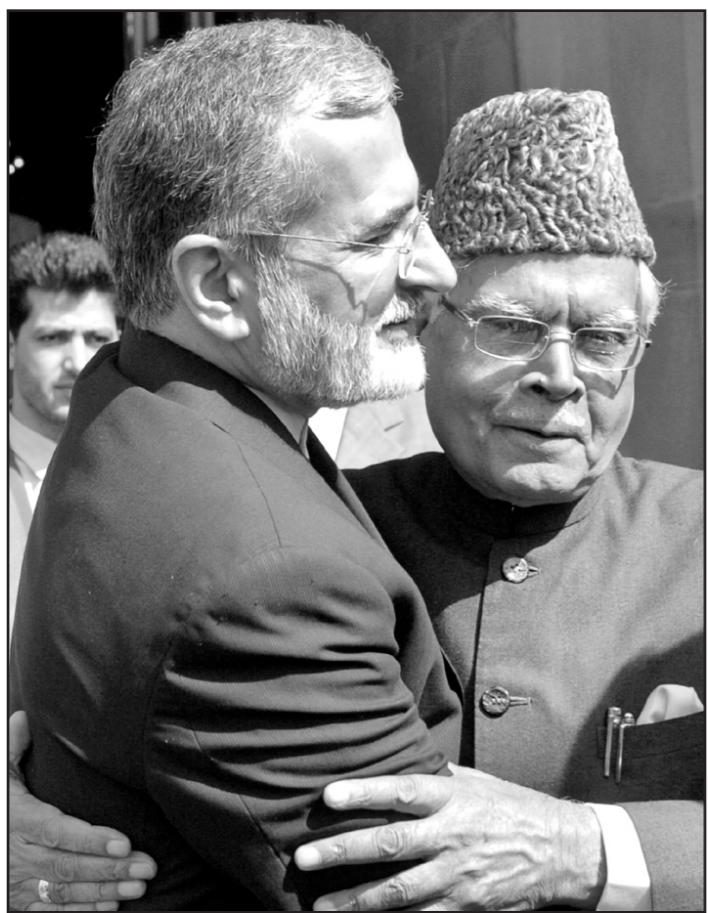
Meanwhile, twelve Maoist rebels were killed in a clash with soldiers in eastern Nepal, an army source said yesterday, in the latest violence since the rebels called a transport blockade to protest the king's power grab.

"At least 12 Maoists were killed in a clash between the rebels and the security personnel on Monday morning," the source said.

No soldiers were killed as they battled around 150 rebels for three hours Monday at Sirkhauli village in Sindhuli district 125km east of Kathmandu, the source said.



Nepalese people read newspapers while a security personnel keeps vigil (R) in Kathmandu yesterday. Maoists called an indefinite transport blockade to protest Nepalese King's power grab on February 1. The Maoist rebels have been fighting to overthrow the monarchy and set up a Communist republic in Nepal since 1996 and the violence has claimed over 11,000 lives.



Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (R) hugs his Iranian counterpart Kamal Kharazi after a signing ceremony for two agreements on India-Iran joint commission and agreement on cultural cooperation in New Delhi yesterday. Kharazi is in India for a three-day official visits.

Kashmiris warned of avalanches, toll hits 175

AFP, Srinagar

India's army warned yesterday of fresh avalanches in Indian Kashmir, where the death toll from massive snowslides hit 175, and urged people living in the most mountainous areas to flee their homes.

Dozens of people were missing in the Himalayan region in what Major General Raj Mehta called "an unprecedented crisis."

"People living in higher reaches must vacate before they're overtaken by tragedy," Mehta told reporters in the snowbound main city, Srinagar.

The army, backed by police and paramilitary forces and civilian volunteers, battled high winds and poor visibility as they raced against time to find survivors from avalanches that struck southern Kashmir over the past four days.

But a police officer in Srinagar said officials were losing hope for the missing buried under snow in six villages which were flattened by weekend avalanches, amid below-zero temperatures.

Police and army officials said a total of 175 people had died in the past four days, 172 of them in the weekend snowslides.

Bomb attacks kill 4 US, 2 Iraqi soldiers

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

A car bomb detonated near an Iraqi troop convoy as it left Baghdad's fortified Green Zone yesterday, killing two soldiers while four US soldiers were killed in bomb attacks on Monday.

The attack happened shortly after midday as the convoy was leaving a main Green Zone exit near the Mansour district of western Baghdad. Police said the car blew up as a commando unit was passing, spraying shrapnel across a wide area.

The sound of the blast echoed across the city.

Three US soldiers were killed and eight wounded Monday in a bomb attack in Iraq, the US military said.

"At approximately 8:00 am (0500 GMT) on February 21, three US soldiers were killed and eight were wounded when an IED (improvised explosive device) detonated during a medical evacuation of a soldier," a statement said.

"The soldier was injured in a convoy accident caused by a civilian vehicle," it added, without specifying where the attack

took place. "A marine assigned to I Marine Expeditionary Force was killed in action yesterday, while conducting security and stability operations in the Al-Anbar province," a statement said.

The death brings to 1,472 the number of US military personnel killed in Iraq since the US-led invasion of March 2003.

US and Iraqi forces and officials have frequently been attacked at or near entrances to the Green Zone, a huge walled and tightly protected compound on the west bank of the Tigris river in the center of the city.

In the three weeks since Iraq's landmark elections, at least 100 members of Iraq's security forces have been killed in suicide bombings and other attacks, while scores have been wounded.

Insurgents have attacked Iraqi police and guards in an effort to set back US attempts to create a viable local security force, and because the Iraqi units are less well defended and less well armed than American soldiers.

India, Pakistan launch talks to boost ties

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan started talks yesterday on ways to strengthen ailing trade links as the peace process between the South Asian arch-rivals gathers pace, officials said.

The commerce secretaries of both countries would discuss over two days a blueprint for eliminating trade barriers and forging closer business cooperation, which has suffered due to decades of political hostility.

Direct bilateral trade stood at 300 million dollars in the 2003-2004 fiscal year but officials said unofficial trade was more than double that.

"It is our misfortune that political circumstances resulted in us having to limit and constrain the spirit. Fortunately, things are changing," Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath told the first meeting of the joint study group on economic cooperation.

The joint study group is aiming to draft a comprehensive economic agreement spanning trade in goods and services, investments and a policy framework.

"We have come to India with great expectations and an open mind. The trade between the two countries has not achieved its potential. We have to try and push this further under this process," said Pakistan's Commerce Secretary Taslim Noorani.

India and Pakistan have launched a series of matching steps to build people-to-people contacts, the latest of which was a decision to run a bus service across the two sides of the Line of Control, the de facto border dividing the disputed Kashmir region claimed by both countries.

Nath said economic cooperation would give a push to peace and prosperity in the entire region.

"Today, we find that the mood amongst our business communities is positive, with a high degree of expectation that both the governments would create an environment which would facilitate economic growth," he added.

Businessmen from the two sides have been sourcing goods from third countries, even though they can buy goods from each other at much lower costs

because of the geographical proximity.

"The first step is for us to exploit the complementarities between our economies. We must identify those goods which are sourced from third countries, but which we can source from each other," Nath said.

"If in any case we are importing these goods from third countries, then why should we hesitate to rather import them from each other?" he asked.

Industry officials said official trade could cross one billion dollars if businesses in both countries sourced goods from each other.

India's exports to Pakistan during the first half of the financial year ending March jumped 256 percent to 246.32 million dollars from 69.16 million dollars in the corresponding period a year earlier.

However, bilateral trade accounts for less than one percent of the neighbours' combined transactions with the rest of the world.

Palestinian PM agrees to revamp cabinet

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei agreed yesterday to revamp his proposed cabinet with more reform-minded ministers and present the new government to parliament today, legislators said.

The compromise, following a one-day delay in parliamentary ratification of a cabinet, appeared to pave the way for new President Mahmoud Abbas to press ahead with promised reforms of the Palestinian Authority and peace efforts with Israel.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was deep in political crisis yesterday over the inclusion of members of Yasser Arafat's corruption-tainted "old guard" in a new cabinet up for approval by a reform-minded legislature.

Lawmakers from Abbas's Fatah faction threatened to vote no-confidence in the government, a move that would force Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei from office, unless changes were made in the

cabinet line-up before parliament met later in the day.

Abbas and pro-reform legislators have been trying to persuade Qorei to drop some Arafat loyalists widely seen by Palestinians as corrupt and include more new faces in the government, especially technocrats who can help it run smoother.

"Fatah members of the legislature will meet before parliament convenes. If they don't receive (the changes), they will proceed with voting no-confidence in Abu Ala (Qorei)," a legislator from the faction told Reuters.

Negotiations Affairs Minister Saeb Erekat described the situation as difficult but said: "That is what democracy is all about." Abbas, who would be under no obligation to leave office if Qorei does, is under pressure from the United States and other international donors to revamp often competing security forces and fight corruption.

US urges Taiwan, China not to be provocative

AFP, Taipei

The United States yesterday called on Taiwan and China not to make provocative steps or statements while Beijing considers a law to prevent the island from drifting away from the mainland.

The US voiced the concern after a senior official from the defunct US embassy in Taiwan visited legislators of the Democratic Progressive Party, the independence-leaning party with which President Chen Shui-bian is affiliated.

Details of Tuesday's closed-door discussions were not available. The meeting follows a threat by Chen late last month to introduce an "anti-annexation" law and possibly hold a referendum if China enacts its controversial legislation.

"We continue to call on both sides to refrain from statements and actions that impede a peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences," said Dana Smith, spokeswoman for the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the US mission in Taipei.

Norway opens peace talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Peacebroker Norway opened talks with Tiger rebels yesterday ahead of the third anniversary of an Oslo-brokered truce, amid signals by Sri Lanka that the guerrillas were aiding tsunami relief work.

Norwegian mediator Erik Solheim began discussions with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the guerrilla-held northern Wanni region in a fresh bid to restart peace talks, officials said.

Solheim's visit comes on the eve of the third anniversary Wednesday of the Oslo-arranged ceasefire between the government and the rebels. The truce came under renewed pressure earlier this month after the slaying of a top rebel regional leader.

The Scandinavian truce monitoring team known as the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) said the lack of peace talks since April 2003 was a serious risk.

"Lack of peace talks is putting a serious strain on the ceasefire and

creating dangerous uncertainty," SLMM chief Hargrup Haukland said, adding that killings could seriously jeopardise the process.

The Sri Lankan government too said that the killing of Tiger eastern political chief E. Koushalyan, and five other rebels two weeks ago endangered the ceasefire that went into effect on February 23, 2002.

Diplomats said although there was little hope of ending the talks impasse, they were hopeful of an agreement between Colombo and the Tigers on tsunami relief.

Negotiations were still under way to establish a joint mechanism to disburse millions of dollars worth of foreign aid for the survivors of the December 26 tsunamis that killed nearly 31,000 people in Sri Lanka and initially left a million homeless. Solheim is making his second visit to Sri Lanka since the disaster. Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen last month met Tiger chief Velupillai Prabhakaran to try to resolve the aid delivery issue.